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NANCY

RHODA BROUGHTON

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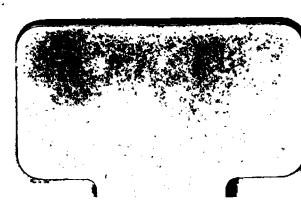

NANCY.

A Novel.

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF "RED AS A ROSE IS SHE," "GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART," ETC., ETC.

"As thro' the land at eve we went,
And pluck'd the ripened ears,
We fell out, my wife and I,
O we fell out I know not why,
And kissed again with tears."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.
1873.

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251. b. 42.

NANCY.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN I rose this morning, I did not think that I should have cried before night; indeed nothing would have seemed to me so unlikely. Cry! on the day of Roger's first back-coming! absurd! And yet now the morning is still quite young, and I have wept abundantly.

I am always rather good at crying. Tears with me do not argue any very profound depth of affliction. My tears have always been somewhat near my eyes, a fact well known to the boys, whom my

pearly drops always leave as stolid and unfeeling as they found them. But the case is different with Roger. Either he is ignorant, or he has forgotten the facility with which I weep, and his distress is proportioned to his ignorance.

My eyes are dried again now, though they and my nose still keep a brave after-glow; and Roger and I are at one again. But, for my part, on this first day, I think it would have been pleasanter if we had never been at two. However, smiling Peace is now again restored to us, and no one, to look at us, as we sit in my boudoir after breakfast, would think that we, or perhaps I should say I, had been so lately employed in chasing her away. As little would any one, looking at the blandness of Vick's profile, as she slumbers on the window-seat in the sun, conjecture of her master-passion for the calves of strangers' legs.

"So you see that I *must* go, Nancy," says

Roger, with a rather wistful appeal to my reason, of whose supremacy he is not, perhaps, quite so confident as he was when he got up this morning. "You understand, don't you, dear?"

I nod.

"Yes, I understand."

I still speak in a subdued and snuffly voice, but the wrath has gone out of me.

"Will you—would you mind," he says, speaking rather hesitatingly, as not quite sure of the reception that his proposition may meet with—"would you mind coming with me as far as Zéphine's?"

"Do you mean come all the way, and go in with you, and stay while you are there?" cry I, with great animation, as a picture of the strict supervision which, by this course of conduct, I shall be enabled to exercise over Mrs. Zéphine's œillades, poses, and little verbal tendernesses, flashes before my mind's eye.

Roger looks down.

"I do not know about *that*," he says slowly. "Perhaps she would not care to go into her husband's liabilities before a—a str—before a third person!"

"Two is company and three is none, in fact," say I, with a slight relapse into the disdainful and snorting mood.

He looks distressed, but attempts no argument or explanation.

"How far did you mean me to come, then?" say I, half ashamed of my humours, but still with an after-thought of pettishness in my voice. "Escort you to the hall-door, I suppose, and kick my heels among the laurustinus until such time as all Mr. Huntley's bills are paid?"

He turns away.

"It is of no consequence," he says, with a slight shade of impatience, and a stronger shade of disappointment in his voice. "I see that you do not wish it, but what I

meant was, that you might have walked with me as far as the gate, so that on this first day we might lose as little of each other's society as possible."

"And so I will!" cry I, impulsively, with a rush of tardy repentance. "I—I—*meant* to come all along. I was only—only—*joking!*"

But to both of us it seems but a sorry jest. We set forth, and walk side by side through the park. Both of us are rather silent. Yes, though we have eight months' arrears of talk to make up, though it seemed to me before he came that in a whole long life there would scarce be time for all the things I had to say to him, yet, now that we are reunited, we are stalking dumbly along through the withered white grass, pallid from the winter storms. Certainly we neither of us could say anything so well worth hearing as what the lark, in his most loud and godly joy, is telling us

from on high. Perhaps it is the knowledge of this that ties our tongues.

The sun shines on our heads. He has not much power yet, but great goodwill. And the air is almost as gentle as June. We have left our own domain behind us, and have reached Mrs. Huntley's white gate. Through the bars, I see the sheltered laurustinus all ablow.

"May I wait for you here?" say I, with diffident urgency, reflecting hopefully, as I make the suggestion, on the wholesome effect on the length of the interview that the knowledge of my being flattening my nose against the bars of the gate all through it, must necessarily have.

Again he looks down, as if unwilling to meet my appealing eyes.

"I think not, Nancy," he answers reluctantly. "You see I cannot possibly tell how long I might be obliged to keep you waiting."

"I do not mind waiting at all," persist I, eagerly. "I am not very impatient; I shall not expect you to be very quick, and" (going on very fast, to hinder him from the second refusal which I see hovering on his lips), "and it is not at all cold; just now you yourself said that you had felt many a chillier May day, and I am so warmly wrapped up, feel!" (taking hold of one of his fingers, and making it softly travel up and down the fur of my thick coat).

He shakes his head, with a gesture unwilling yet decided.

"No, Nancy, it could not be! I had rather that you would go home!"

"I have no doubt you would!" say I, turning sharply and huffily away; then, with a sudden recollecting and repenting myself, "May I come back, then?" I say, meekly. "Come and fetch you, I mean, after a time—any long time that you like!"

"*Will* you?" he cries, with animation,

the look of unwilling refusal vanishing from his face. "Would you *like?* would not it be too much trouble?"

"Not at all! not at all!" reply I, affably. "How soon, then?" (taking out my watch); "in half an hour?"

Again his face falls a little.

"I think it must be longer than *that*, Nancy."

"An hour, then?" say I, lifting a lengthened countenance wistfully to his; "people may do a good deal in an hour, may not they?"

"Had not we better be on the safe side, and say an hour and a half?" suggests he, but somewhat apprehensively—or I imagine so. "I shall be sure not to keep you a minute then;—I do not relish the notion of my wife tramping up and down this muddy road all by herself."

"And I do not relish the notion of my husband—" return I, beginning to speak

very fast, and then suddenly breaking off —"Well, good-bye!"

"Say, good-bye, Roger," cries he, catching my hand in detention, as I turn away. "Nancy, if you knew how fond I have grown of my own name! In despite of Tichborne, I think it *lovely*."

I laugh.

"Good-bye, *Roger!*"

He has opened the gate, and turned in. I watch him, as he walks with long quick steps up the little trim-swept drive. As I follow him with my eyes, a devil enters into me. I cry,

"Roger!"

He turns at once.

"Ask her to show you Algy's bracelet," I say, with an awkward laugh; and then, thoroughly afraid of the effect of my bombshell, and not daring to see what sort it is, I turn and run quickly away.

The end of the hour and a half finds me

punctually peering through the bars again. Well, I am first at the rendezvous. This, perhaps, is not very surprising, as I have not given him one moment's law. For the first five minutes, I am very fairly happy and content. The lark is still fluttering in strong rapture up in the heights of the sky; and for these five minutes I listen to him, soothed and hallowed. But after they are past, it is different. God's bird may be silent, as far as I am concerned: not a verse more of his clear psalm do I hear. An uneasy devil of jealousy has entered into me, and stopped my ears. I take hold of the bars of the gate, and peer through, as far as my head will go: then I open it, and, stealing on tiptoe up the drive a little way, to the first corner, look warily round it. Not a sign of him! Not a sound! Not even a whisper of air to rustle the glistening laurel leaves, or stir the flat laurustinus sprays.

I return to the road, and inculcate patience on myself. Why may not I take a lesson in easy-mindedness from Vick? Was not it Hartley Coleridge, who suggested that perhaps dogs have a language of smell; and that what to us is a noisome smell, is to them a beautiful poem. If so, Vick is searching for lyrics and epics in the ditch. I stroll along the wintry brown hedgerow, and begin to pick Roger a little scant nosegay. He shall see how patient I am! how *un*sulky! with what sunny mildness I can wait his leisure! I have already two or three snowdrops in my breast, that I picked as I came through the garden. To these I add a drooping hazel-tassel or two, and a little bit of honeysuckle leaf, just breaking greenly into life. This is all I can find—all the scentless first-fruits of the baby year.

It is ten minutes past the due time now. Again I listen intently, as I listened yes-

terday, for his coming. There is a sound now; but, alas! not the right one! It is the rumbling of an approaching carriage. A pony-chaise bowls past. The occupants are acquaintances of mine, and we bow and smile to each other. As long as they are in sight, I affect to be diligently botanizing in the hedge. When they have disappeared, I sit down on a heap of stones, and take out my watch for the hundredth time; a whole quarter of an hour!

"He does not relish the notion of his wife tramping up and down this muddy road by herself, does not he?" say I, speaking out loud, and gnashing my teeth.

Then I hurl my little posy away from me into the mud, as far as it will go. What has become of my patience? my sunny mildness? Then, as the recollection of the velvet-gown and mob-cap episode recurs to me, I repent me, and, cross-

ing the road, pick up again my harmless catkins and snowdrops, and re-arrange them. I have hardly finished wiping the mire from the tender, lilac-veined snowdrop petals, before I hear his voice in the distance, in conversation with some one. Clearly, Delilah is coming to see the last of him! I expect that she mostly escorts them to the gate. In my present frame of mind, it would be physically impossible for me to salute her with the bland civility which society enjoins on people of our stage of civilization. I therefore remain sitting on my heap.

Presently, Roger emerges alone. He does not see me at first, but looks up the road, and down the road, in search of me. When, at last, he perceives me, no smile —(as has ever hitherto been his wont)— kindles his eyes and lips. With unstirred gravity, he approaches me.

"Here you are *at last!*" cry I, scamper-

ing to meet him, but with a stress from which human nature is unable to refrain on the last two words.

"At last?" he repeats in a tone of surprise; "am I over time?—Yes"—(looking at his watch)—"so I am! I had no idea of it; I hope you have not been long waiting."

"*I* was here to the minute," reply I, curtly; and again my tongue declines to refrain from accentuation.

"I beg your pardon!" he says, still speaking with unnecessary seriousness, as it seems to me, "I really had no idea of it."

"I daresay not," say I, with a little wintry grin; "I never heard that they had a clock in Paradise."

"*In Paradise!*" he repeats, looking at me strangely with his keen, clear eyes, that seem to me have less of a caress in them than they ever had before on meeting

mine. "What has *Paradise* to say to it? Do you imagine that I have been in *Paradise* since I left you here?"

"I do not know, I am sure!" reply I, rather confused, and childishly stirring the stiff red mud with the end of my boot, "I believe *they* mostly do; Algy does—" then afraid of drawing down the vial of his wrath on me a second time for my scandal-mongering propensities, I go on quickly. "Were you talking to yourself as you came down the drive? I heard your voice as if in conversation. I sometimes talk to myself when I am by myself, quite loud."

"Do you? I do not think I do; at least I am not aware of it; I was talking to Zéphine."

"Why did not she come to the gate, then?" inquire I, tartly; "did she know I was there? did not she want to see me?"

"I do not know; I did not ask her."

I look up at him in strong surprise. We

are in the park now—our own unpeopled silent park, where none but the deer can see us; and yet he has not offered me the smallest caress; not once has he called me "Nancy;" he, to whom hitherto my homely name has appeared so sweet. It is only an hour and three quarters since I parted from him, and yet in that short space an indisputable shade—a change that exists not only in my imagination, but one that no most careless superficial eye could avoid seeing—has come over him. Face, manner, even gait, are all altered. I think of Algy—Algy as he used to be, our jovial pet and playfellow, Algy as he now is, soured, sulky, unloving, his very beauty dimmed by discontent and passion. Is this the beginning of a like change in Roger?

A spasm of jealous agony, of angry despair, contracts my heart as I think this.

"Well, are all Mr. Huntley's debts

paid?" I ask, trying to speak in a tone of sprightly ease; "is there a good hope of his coming back soon?"

"Not yet awhile; in time, perhaps, he may."

Still there is not a vestige of a smile on his face. He does not look at me as he speaks; his eyes are on the long dead knots of the colourless grass at his feet; in his expression despondency and pre-occupation strive for supremacy.

"Have you made your head ache?" I say, gently stealing my hand into his, "there is nothing that addles the brains like muddling over accounts, is there?"

Am I awake? *Can* I believe it? He has dropped my hand, as if he disliked the touch of it.

"No, thanks, no. I have no headache," he answers, hastily.

Another little silence. We are marching quickly along, as if our great object were

to get our *tête-à-tête* over. As we came, we dawdled, stood still to listen to the lark, to look at the wool-soft cloud heaps piled in the west—on any trivial excuse indeed; but now all these things are changed.

"Did you talk of business *all* the time?" I ask, by-and-by, with timid curiosity.

It is *not* my fancy, he does plainly hesitate.

"Not quite *all*," he answers, in a low voice, and still looking away from me.

"About *what*, then?" I persist, in a voice through whose counterfeit playfulness I myself too plainly hear the unconquerable tremulousness; "may not I hear?—or is it a secret?"

He does not answer; it seems to me that he is considering what response to make.

"Perhaps," say I, still with a poor assumption of lightness and gaiety, "perhaps you were talking of—of old times."

He laughs a little, but *whose* laugh has he borrowed? in that dry, harsh tone there is nothing of my Roger's mellow mirth!

"Not we; old times must take care of themselves; one has enough to do with the new ones, I find."

"Did she—did she say anything to you about—about *Algy*, then?"—hesitatingly.

"We did not mention his name."

There is something so abrupt and trenchant in his tone that I have not the spirit to pursue my inquiries any further. In deep astonishment and still deeper mortification, I pursue my way in silence.

Suddenly Roger comes to a standstill.

"Nancy!" he says, in a voice that is more like his own, stopping and laying his hands on my shoulders; while in his eyes is something of his old kindness: yet not quite the old kindness either; there is more of unwilling, rueful yearning in them than

there ever was in that. "Nancy, how old are you?—nineteen, is it not?"

"Very nearly twenty," reply I, cheerfully, for he has called me "Nancy," and I hail it as a sign of returning fine weather; "we may call it twenty; will not it be a comfort when I am well out of my teens?"

"And I am forty-eight," he says, as if speaking more to himself than to me, and sighing heavily; "it is a *monstrous*, an *unnatural* disparity!"

"It is not nearly so bad as if it were *the other way*," reply I, laughing gaily; "I forty-eight, and *you* twenty, is it?"

"My child! my child!"—speaking with an accent of, to me, unaccountable suffering—"what possessed me to *marry* you? why did not I *adopt* you instead? It would have been a hundred times more seemly!"

"It is a little late to think of that now, is not it?" I say, with an uncomfortable

smile; then I go on, with an uneasy laugh, "that was the very idea that occurred to us the first night you arrived; at least, it never struck us as possible that you would take any notice of *me*, but we all said what a good thing it would be for the family if you would adopt Barbara or the Brat."

"Did you?" (very quickly, in a tone of keen pain); "it struck you all in the same light then?"

"But that was before we had seen you," I answer, hastily, repenting my confession as soon as I see its effects. "When we *had*, we soon changed our tune."

"*If* I *had* adopted you," he pursues, still looking at me with the same painful and intent wistfulness, "if I had been your father, you would have been fond of me, would not you? Not *afraid* of me—not afraid to tell me anything that most nearly concerned you—you would perhaps"—(with a difficult smile)—"you would per-

haps have made me your *confidant*, would you, Nancy?"

I look up at him in utter bewilderment.

"What are you talking about? Why do I want a confidant? What have I to confide? What have I to tell any one?"

Our eyes are resting on each other, and, as I speak, I feel his go with clean and piercing search right through mine into my soul. In a moment I think of Musgrave, and the untold black tale now for ever in my thought attached to him, and, as I so think, the hot flush of agonized shame that the recollection of him never fails to call to my face, invades cheeks, brow, and throat. To hide it, I drop my head on Roger's breast. Shall I tell him *now*, this instant? Is it possible that he has already some faint and shadowy suspicion of the truth—some vague conjecture concerning it, as something in his manner seems to say? But no! it is absolutely impossible! Who,

with the best will in the world, could have told him? Is not the tale safely buried in the deep grave of Musgrave's and my two hearts?

I raise my head, and twice essay to speak. Twice I stop, choked. How can I put into words the insult I have received? How can I reveal to him the slack levity, the careless looseness with which I have kept the honour confided to me?

As my eyes stray helplessly round in a vain search for advice or help from the infinite unfeeling apathy of nature, I catch sight of the distant chimneys of the Abbey. How near it is. After all, why should I sow dissension between such close neighbours? why make an irreparable breach between two families, hitherto united by the kindly ties of mutual friendship and goodwill?

Frank is young, very young; he has been—so Roger himself told me—very ill

brought up. Perhaps he has already repented, who knows? I try to persuade myself that these are the reasons—and sufficient reasons—of my silence, and I take my resolution afresh. I will be dumb. The flush slowly dies out of my face, and when I think it is almost gone, I venture to look again at Roger. I think that his eyes have never left me. They seem to be expecting me to speak, but as I still remain silent, he turns at length away, and also gently removes his hands from my shoulders. We stand apart.

"Well, Nancy," he says, sighing again, as if from the bottom of his soul, "my poor child, it is no use talking about it. I can never be your father now."

"And a very good thing too!" rejoin I, with a dogged stoutness. "I do not see what I want with *two* fathers; I have always found *one* amply enough—quite as much as I could manage, in fact."

He seems hardly to be listening to me, He has dropped his eyes on the ground, and is speaking more to himself than to me.

"Husband and wife we are!" he says, with a slow depression of tone, "and as long as God's and man's laws stand, husband and wife we must remain!"

"You are not very polite," I cry, with an indignant lump rising in my throat, "you speak as if you were *sorry* for it—*are* you?"

He lifts his eyes again, and again their keen search investigates the depths of my soul; but no human eye can rightly read the secrets of any other human spirit: they find what they expect to find, not what is there. Clear and cuttingly keen as they are, Roger's eyes do not read my soul aright.

"Are *you*, Nancy?"

"If *you* are, I am," I reply, with a half-smothered sob.

He makes no rejoinder, and we begin again to walk along homewards, but slowly this time.

"We have made a mistake, perhaps," he says presently, still speaking with the same slow and ruminating sadness in his tone. "The inscrutable God alone knows why He permits His creatures to mar all their seventy years by one short false step—yes—a *mistake!*"

(Ah me! ah me! I always mistrusted those laurustinus! They sent me back my brother churlish and embittered, but oh! that in my steadfast Roger they should have worked such a sudden deadly change!)

"Is it more a mistake," I cry, bursting out into irrepressible anger, "than it was two hours ago, when I left you at that gate? You did not seem to think it a mistake *then*—at least you hid it very well, if you did"—(then going on quickly, seeing

that he is about to interrupt me)—"have you been *comparing notes*, pray? Has *she* found it a mistake, too?"

"Yes, *that* she has! Poor soul! God help her!" he answers, compassionately.

Something in the pity of his tone jars frightfully on my strung nerves.

"If God has to help all the poor souls who have made mistakes, He will have His hands full!" I retort, bitterly.

Another silence. We are drawing near the pleasure-grounds: the great rhododendron belt that shelters the shrubbery from the east wind.

"Nancy," says Roger, again stopping, and facing me too. This time he does not put his hands on my shoulders; the melancholy is still in his eyes, but there is no longer any harshness. They repossess their natural kindly benignity. "Though it is perhaps impossible that there should be between us that passionate love that

there might be between people that are nearer each other in age—more fitly mated—yet there is no reason why we should not *like* each other very heartily, is there, dear? why there should not be between us absolute confidence, perfect frankness—that is the great thing, is not it?"

He is looking with such intense wistfulness at me, that I turn away. Why should not there be passionate love between us? Who is there but himself to hinder it? So I make no answer.

"I dare say," he says, taking my right hand, and holding it with a cool and kindly clasp, "that you think it difficult—next door to impossible—for two people, one at the outset, one almost on the confines of life, to enter very understandingly into each other's interests! No doubt the thought that I—being so much ahead of you in years"—(sighing again heavily)—"cannot see with your eyes, or look at things from

your stand-point—would make it harder for you to come to me in your troubles; but indeed, dear, if you believe me, I will *try*, and as we are to spend our lives together, I think it would be better, would not it?"

He speaks with a deprecating humility, an almost imploring gentleness, but I am so thoroughly upset by the astounding change that has come over the tone of his talk—by the clouds that have suddenly darkened the morning sunshine of my horizon, that I cannot answer him in the same tone.

"Perhaps we shall not have to spend all our lives together!" I say, with a harsh laugh. "Cheer up! One of us may *die!* who knows?"

After that we neither of us say anything till we reach the house.

CHAPTER II.

"Yea, by God's rood, I trusted you too well!"

IN the hall we part without a word, and I, spiritlessly, mount the staircase alone. How I flew down it this morning, three steps at a time, and had some ado to hinder myself from sliding down the banisters, as we have all often, with dangerous joy, done at home. Now I crawl up, like some sickly old person. When I reach my bedroom, I throw myself into the first chair, and lie in it—

"—— quiet as any water-sodden log
Stay'd in the wandering warble of a brook."

I do not attempt to take off my hat and jacket. Of what use is it to take them off more than to leave them on, or to leave them on more than to take them off? Of what use is *anything*, pray? What a weary round life is! what a silly circle of importunate repetitions! eating only to be hungry again; waking only to sleep; sleeping only to wake!

At first I am too inert even to think, even to lift my hand to protect my cheek from Vick's muddy paws, who, annoyed at my evident inattention to her presence, is sitting on my lap, making little impatient *clawings* at my defenceless countenance. But gradually on the river of recollection all the incidents of the morning flow through my mind. In more startling relief than ever the astounding change in Roger, wrought by those ill-starred two hours, stands out. Is it possible that I may have been attributing it to a wrong cause? Doubtless the first

interview with the woman he had loved, and who had thrown him over (by-the-by, how forgiving men are!)—yes, the first, probably, since they had stood in the relation of betrothed people to each other—must have been full of pain. Doubtless the contrast between the crude gawkiness of the raw girl he has drifted into marrying—for I suppose it was more accident than anything else—and the mature and subtle grace, the fine and low-voiced sweetness of the woman whom his whole heart and soul and taste chose and approved, must have struck him with keen force. I expected *that:* it would not have taken me by surprise. If he had emerged from among the laurustinus, depressed, and vainly struggling for a factitious cheerfulness, I think I could have understood it. I think I could have borne with it, could have tried meekly to steal back into his heart again, to win him back, in despite of ignorance,

gawkiness, and all other my drawbacks, by force of sheer love.

But the change was surely too abrupt to be accounted for on this hypothesis. Would *Roger*, my pattern of courtesy—Roger, who shrinks from hurting the meanest beggar's feelings—would he, in such plain terms, have deplored and wished undone our marriage, if it were only suffering to *himself* that it had entailed? Has his unselfish chivalry gone the way of Algy's brotherly love? Impossible! the more I think of it, the more unlikely it seems—the more certain it appears to me that I must look elsewhere for the cause of the alteration that has so heavily darkened my day.

I have risen, and am walking quickly up and down. I have shaken off my stolid apathy, or rather, it has fallen off of itself. Can she have told him any ill tales of me? anything to my disadvantage? Instantly

the thought of Musgrave—the black and heavy thought that is never far from the portals of my mind—darts across me, and, at the same instant, like a flash of lightning, the recollection of my meeting her on the fatal evening, just as (with tear-stained, swollen face) I had parted from Frank—of the alert and lively interest in her eyes, as she bowed and smiled to me, flames with sudden illumination into my soul. Still I can hardly credit it. It would, no doubt, be pleasant to her to sow dissension between us, but would even *she* dare to carry ill tales of a wife to a husband? And even supposing that she had, would he attach so much importance to my being seen with wet cheeks? I, who cry so easily—I, who wept myself nearly blind when Jacky caught his leg in the snare? If he thinks so much of that part of the tale, *what would he think of the rest?*

As I make this reflection I shudder, and

again congratulate myself on my silence. For beyond our parting and my tears, it is *impossible* that she can have told him aught.

Men are not prone to publish their own discomfitures; even *I* know that much. I exonerate Mr. Musgrave from all share in making it known—and have the mossed tree-trunks lips? or the loud brook an articulate tongue? Thank God! thank God! *no!* Nature never blabs. With infinite composure, with a most calm smile she *listens*, but she never tells again.

A little reassured by this thought, I resolve to remain in doubt no longer than I can help, but to ascertain, if necessary, by direct inquiry, whether my suspicions are correct. This determination is no sooner come to than it puts fresh life and energy into my limbs. I take off my hat and jacket, smooth my hair, and prepare with some alacrity for luncheon.

It is evening, however, before I have an opportunity of putting my resolve in practice. At luncheon, there are the servants: all afternoon, Roger is closeted with his agent: before we set off this morning, he never mentioned the agent: he never figured at all in our day's plan—(I imagined that he was to be kept till to-morrow);—and at dinner there are the servants again. Thank God, they are gone now! We are alone, Roger and I. We are sitting in my boudoir, as in my day-dreams, before his return, I had pictured us; but, alas! where is the caressing proximity which figured in all my visions? where is the stool on which I was to sit at his feet, with head confidently leant on his arm? As it happens, Vick is sitting on the stool, and we occupy two arm-chairs, at civil distance from each other, much as if we had been married sixty years, and had hated each other for fifty-nine of them. I am

idly fiddle-faddling with a piece of work, and Roger—is it possible?—is stretching out his hand towards a book.

"You do not mean to say that you are going to *read?*" I say, in a tone of sharp vexation.

He lays it down again.

"If you had rather talk, I will not."

"I am afraid," say I, with a sour laugh, "that you have not kept much conversation *for home use!* I suppose you exhausted it all, this morning, at Laurel Cottage!"

He passes his hand slowly across his forehead.

"Perhaps!—I do not think I am in a very talking vein."

"By-the-by," say I, my heart beating thick, and with a hurry and tremor in my voice, as I approach the desired yet dreaded theme, "you have never told me what it was, beside Mr. Huntley's debts,

that you talked of this morning!—you owned that you did not talk of business *quite* all the time!"

"Did I?"

He has forgotten his book now; across the flame of the candles, he is looking full and steadily at me.

"When I asked you, you said it was not about old times!—of course—" (laughing acridly)—"I can imagine your becoming illimitably diffuse about *them*, but you told me, that, 'No,' you did not mention them."

"I told truth."

"You also said," continue I, with my voice still trembling, and my pulses throbbing, "that it was not *Algy* that you were discussing!—if *I* had been in your place, I could, perhaps, have found a good deal to say about *him;* but you told me that you never mentioned him."

"We did not."

"Then what *did* you talk about?" I ask, in strong excitement; "it must have been a very odd theme that you find such difficulty in repeating."

Still he is looking, with searching gravity, full in my face.

"Do you *really* wish to know?"

I cannot meet his eyes: something in me makes me quail before them. I turn mine away, but answer, stoutly,

"Yes, I *do* wish. Why should I have asked if I did not?"

Still he says nothing: still I feel, though I am not looking at him, that his eyes are upon me.

"Was it—" say I, unable any longer to bear that dumb gaze, and preferring to take the bull by the horns, and rush on my fate—"was it anything about *me?* has she been telling you any tales of—of—*me?*"

No answer! No sound but the clock,

and Vick's heavy breathing, as she peacefully snores on the footstool. I *cannot* bear the suspense. Again I lift my eyes, and look at him. Yes, I am right! the intense anxiety—the overpowering emotion on his face tell me that I have touched the right string.

"Are there—are there—are you aware that there are any tales that she *could* tell of you?"

Again I laugh harshly.

"Ha! ha! if we came to mutual anecdotes, I am not quite sure that I might not have the best of it!"

"That is not the question," he replies, in a voice so exceedingly stern, so absolutely different from anything I have ever hitherto contemplated as possible in my gentle, genial Roger, that again, to the depths of my soul, I quail; how could I ever, in wildest dreams, have thought I should dare to tell him?—"it is nothing

to me what tales *you* can tell of *her!—she* is not my wife!—what I wish to know—what I *will* know, is, whether there is anything that she *could* say of you!"

For a moment, I do not answer. I cannot. A coward fear is grasping my heart with its clammy hands. Then—

"*Could!*" say I, shrugging my shoulders, and feebly trying to laugh derisively; "of course she could! it would be difficult to set a limit to the powers of a lady of her imagination!"

"What do you mean?" he cries, quickly, and with what sounds like a sort of hope in his voice; "have you any reason—any grounds for thinking her inventive?"

I do not answer directly.

"It is true, then," I cry, with flashing eyes, and in a voice of great and indignant anguish. "I have not been mistaken! I was right! Is it possible that *you*, who, only this morning, warned me with such

severity against backbiting, have been calmly listening to scandalous tales about me from a stranger?"

He does not interrupt me: he is listening eagerly, and that sort of hope is still in his face.

"I *knew* it would come, sooner or later," I continue, speaking excitedly, and with intense bitterness—"sooner or later, I knew that it would be a case of Algy over again! but I did not—did not think that it would have been quite so soon! Great Heavens!" (smiting my hands sharply together, and looking upwards) "I *have* fallen low! to think that I should come to be discussed by *you* with *her!*"

"I have *not* discussed you with her," he answers, very solemnly, and still looking at me with that profound and greedy eagerness in his eyes; "with *no* living soul would I discuss my wife—I should have hardly thought I need tell you that!"

What I heard, I heard by accident. She —as I believe, in all innocence of heart— referred to — the — the — circumstance, taking it for granted that I knew it—that *you* had told me of it, and I—*I*—" (raising his clenched right hand to emphasize his speech)—" I take God to witness, I had no more idea to what she was alluding— as soon as I understood—she must have thought me very dull—" (laughing hoarsely)—" for it was a long time before I took it in—but as soon as I understood to what manner of anecdote it was that she was referring—then, *at once*, I bade her be silent!—not even with *her*, would I talk over my wife!"

He stops. He has risen from his chair, and is now standing before me. His breath comes quick and panting; and his face is not far from being as white as mine.

" But what I have learnt," he continues

presently, in a low voice, that, by a great effort, he succeeds in making calm and steady, "I cannot again unlearn! I would not if I could!—I have no desire to live in a fool's paradise! I tried hard this morning—God knows what constraint I had to put upon myself—to induce you to tell me of your own accord—to *volunteer* it—but you would not—you were *resolutely* silent. Why were you? Why were you?" (breaking off with an uncontrollable emotion.) "I should not have been hard upon you—I should have made allowances! God knows we all need it!"

I sit listening in a stony silence: every bit of me seems turned into cold rock.

"But *now*," he says, regathering his composure, and speaking with a resolute stern quiet, "I have no other resource—you have left me none—but to come to you, and ask point-blank, is this true, or is it false?"

For a moment, my throat seems absolutely stopped up, choked; there seems no passage for my voice, through its dry parched gates. Then at length I speak faintly. "Is *what* true? is what false? I suppose you will not expect me to deny it, before I know what it is!"

He does not at once answer. He takes a turn once or twice up and down the silent room, in strong endeavour to overcome and keep down his agitation, then he returns and speaks; with a face paler indeed than I could have imagined anything so bronzed could be; graver, more austere than I ever thought I should see it, but still without bluster or hectoring violence.

"Is it true then?" he says, speaking in a very low key. "Great God! that I should have to put such a question to my wife; that one evening, about a week ago, on the very day indeed that the news of my intended return arrived, you were seen part-

ing with—with—*Musgrave*" (he seems to have an intense difficulty in pronouncing the name) "at or after nightfall, on the edge of Brindley Wood, *he* in a state of the most evident and extreme agitation, and *you* in floods of tears!—is it true, or is it false?—for God's sake, speak quickly!"

But I cannot comply with his request. I am *gasping*. His eyes are upon me, and at every second's delay, they gather additional sternness. Oh how awful they are in their just wrath! When was father, in his worst and most thunderous storms, half so dreadful? half so awe-inspiring?

"What sort of an interview could it have been to which there was such a close?" he says, as if making the reflection more to himself than to me; "speak! is it true?"

I can no longer defer my answer. One thing or another I must say: both eyes and lips imperatively demand it.

Twice, nay, *thrice* I struggle—struggle mightily to speak, and speak well and truly; and twice, nay, three times, that base fear strangles my words. Then at length—oh friends! do not be any harder upon me than you can help, for indeed, *indeed* I have paid sorely for it, and it is the first lie that ever I told; then, at length with a face as wan as the ashes of a dead fire—with trembling lips, and a faint, scarcely audible voice, I say, "No, it is not true!"

"*Not true?*" he echoes, catching up my words quickly; but in his voice is none of the relief, the restored amenity that I had looked for, and for the hope of which I have perjured myself; equally in voice and face, there is only a deep and astonished anger.

"*Not true!*—you mean to say that it is *false!*"

"Yes, false!" I repeat in a sickly whisper. Oh why, if I *must* lie, do not I do it

with a bold and voluble assurance? whom would my starved pinched falsehood deceive?

"You mean to say," speaking with irrepressible excitement, while the wrathful light gathers and grows intenser in the gray depths of his eyes, "that this—this *interview* never took place? that it is all a delusion; a mistake?"

"Yes."

I repeat it mechanically now. Having gone thus far, I must go on, but I feel giddy and sick, and my hands grasp the arms of my chair. I feel as if I should fall out of it if they did not.

"You are *sure?*" speaking with a heavy emphasis, and looking persistently at me, while the anger of his eyes is dashed and crossed by a miserable entreaty. Ah! if they had had that look at first, I could have told him. "Are you *sure?*" he repeats, and I, driven by the fates to my

destruction, while God hides His face from me, and the devil pushes me on, answer hazily, "Yes; quite sure!"

Then he asks me no more questions; he turns and slowly leaves the room, and I know that I have lied in vain!

CHAPTER III.

AND thus I, ingenious architect of my own ruin, build up the barrier of a lie between myself and Roger. It is a barrier that hourly grows higher, more impassable. As the days go by, I say to myself in heart sickness, that I shall never now cross it — never see it levelled with the earth. Even when we two are dead it will still rise between us in the other world; if—as all the nations have agreed to say—there *be* another. For my part, I think at this time, that if there is any choice of its bearing aught of resem-

blance to this present world, I had far fainer there were none.

With all due deference to Shakespeare—and I suppose that even the one supreme genius of all time must, in his day, have made a mistake or two—I have but faint belief in the "sweet uses of adversity." I think that they are about as mythical as the jewels in the toad's ugly skull, to which he likened them. It is in *prosperity* that one looks up, with leaping heart and clear eyes, and through the clouds sees God sitting throned in light. In adversity one sees nothing but one's own dunghill and boils.

At least such has been my experience. I think I could have borne it better if I had not looked forward to his return so much—if he had been an austere and bitter tyrant, to *whose coming* I had looked with dread, I could have braced my nerves and pulled myself together, to face with some

name of Musgrave mentioned between us. If he had been one most dear to us both and had died untimely, we could not avoid with more sacred care, any allusion to him. And even if, by doing infinite violence to myself, I could bring myself to overcome the painful steepness of the hill of difficulty that lies between me and the subject, and tell the tardy truth, to what use, pray? Having once owned that I had lied, could I resent any statement of mine being taken with distrust? Would he believe me? Not he! He would say, "If you were as innocent as you say, why did you *lie?* If you were innocent, what had you to fear?" So I hold my peace. And as the days go, and the winter wanes, it seems to me that I can plainly see, with no uncertain or doubtful eyes, Roger's love wane too.

After all, why should I wonder? I may be sorry, for who ever saw gladly love—the one all-good thing on this

earth, most of whose good things are adulterated and dirt-smirched—who ever saw it *gladly* slip away from them ? But I cannot be surprised.

With Roger, love and trust must ever go hand-in-hand ; and when the one has gone, the other must needs soon follow.

After all, what he loved in me was a delusion—had never existed. It was my blunt honesty, my transparent candour, the open-hearted downrightness that in me amounted to a misfortune, that had first attracted him. And now that he has found that the unpolished abruptness of my manners can conceal as great an amount of deception as the most insinuating silkiness of any one else's, I do not see what there is left in me to attract him. Certainly I have no beauty to excite a man's passions, nor any genius to enchain his intellect, nor even any pretty accomplishment to amuse his leisure.

Why *should* he love me? Because I am his wife? Nay, nay! who ever loved because it was their duty? who ever succeeded in putting love in harness, and *driving* him? Sooner than be the object of such uphill conscientious affection, I had far rather be treated with cold indifference —active hatred even. Because I am young? That seems no recommendation in his eyes! Because I love him? He does not believe it. Once or twice I have tried to tell him so, and he has gently pooh-poohed me.

Sometimes it has occurred to me that perhaps if I had him all to myself, I might even yet bring him back to me—might reconcile him to my paucity of attractions, and persuade him of my honesty; but what chance have I, when every day, every hour of the day if he likes to put himself to such frequent pain, he may see and bitterly note the contrast between the

woman of his choice and the woman of his fate—the woman from whom he is irrevocably parted, and the woman to whom he is as irrevocably joined. And I think that hardly a day passes that he does not give himself the opportunity of instituting the comparison.

Not that he is unkind to me; do not think that. It would be impossible to Roger to be unkind to anything, much more to any weakly woman thing that is quite in his own power. No, no! there is no fear of that. I have no need to be a Grizzle. I have no cross words, no petulances, no neglects even, to bear. But oh! in all his friendly words, in all his kindly, considerate actions, what a *chill* there is! It is as if some one that had been a day dead laid their hand on my heart!

How many, *many* miles farther apart we are now, than we were when I was here, and he in Antigua; albeit then the noisy

winds roared and sung, and the brown billows tumbled between us. If he would but *hit* me, or box my ears, as Bobby has so often done—a good swinging, tingling box, that made one see stars, and incarnadined all one side of one's countenance—oh, how much *much* less would it hurt than do the frosty chillness of his smiles, the uncaressing touch of his cool hands!

I have plenty of time to think these thoughts, for I am a great deal alone now. Roger is out all day, hunting or with his agent, or on some of the manifold business that landed property entails, or that the settlement of Mr. Huntley's inextricably tangled affairs involves. Very often he does not come in till dressing-time. I never ask him where he has been—never! I think that I know.

Often in these after days, pondering on those ill times, seeing their incidents in that duer proportion that a standpoint at a

little distance from them gives, it has occurred to me that sometimes I was wrong, that not seldom, while I was eating my heart out upstairs, with dumb jealousy picturing to myself my husband in the shaded fragrance, the dulcet gloom of the drawing-room at Laurel Cottage, he was in the house with me, as much alone as I, in the dull solitude of his own room, pacing up and down the carpet, or bending over an unread book.

I will tell you why I think so. One day —it is the end of March now, the year is no longer a swaddled baby, it is shooting up into a tall stripling—I have been straying about the brown gardens, *alone*, of course. It is a year to-day since Bobby and I together strolled among the kitchen stuff in the garden at home, since he served me that ill turn with the ladder. Everything reminds me of that day: these might be the same crocus clumps as those that

last year frightened away winter with their purple and gold banners. I remember that as I looked down their deep throats, I was humming Tou Tou's verb, "J'aime, I love; Tu aimes, Thou lovest; Il aime, He loves."

I sigh. There was the same purple promise over the budded woods; the same sharpness in the bustling wind. Since then, nature has gone through all her plodding processes, and now it is all to do over again. A sense of fatigue at the infinite repetitions of life comes over me. If nature would but make a little variation! If the seasons would but change their places a little, and the flowers their order, so that there might be something of unexpectedness about them! But no! they walk round and round for ever in their monotonous leisure.

I am stooping to pick a little posy of violets as these languid thoughts dawdle

through my mind—blue mysteries of sweetness and colour, born of the unscented, dull earth. As I pass Roger's door, having re-entered the house, the thought strikes me to set them on his writing-table. Most likely he will not notice them, not be aware of them: but even so they will be able humbly to speak to him the sweet things that he will not listen to from me. I open the door and listlessly enter. If I had thought that there was any chance of his being within, I should not have done so without knocking; indeed, I hardly think I should have done it at all, but this seems to me most unlikely. Nevertheless, he is.

As I enter, I catch sudden sight of him. He is sitting in his arm-chair, his elbows leant on the table before him, his hand passed through his ruffled hair, and his gray eyes straying abstractedly away from the neglected page before him. I see him before he sees me. I have time to take in

all the dejection of his attitude, all its spiritless idleness. At the slight noise my skirts make, he looks up. I stop on the threshold.

"I—I thought you were out," say I, hesitatingly, and reddening a little, as if I were being caught in the commission of some little private sin.

"No, I came in an hour ago."

"I beg your pardon," I say, humbly; "I will not disturb you; I would have knocked if I had known!"

He has risen, and is coming towards me.

"Knock! why, in Heaven's name, *should* you knock?" he says, with something of his old glad animation; then, suddenly changing his tone to one of courteous friendly coldness, "Why do you stand out there? will not you come in?"

I comply with this invitation, and entering, sit down in another arm-chair not far

from Roger's, but now that I am here, I do not seem to have much to say.

"You have been in the gardens?" he says presently, glancing at my little nosegay, and speaking more to hinder total silence from reigning, than for any other reason.

"Yes," I reply, trying to be cheerful and chatty, "I have been picking *these;* the Czars have not half their perfume, though they are three times their size! *these* smell so good!"

As I speak, I timidly half stretch out the little bunch to him, that he, too, may inhale their odour, but the gesture is so uncertain and faint that he does not perceive it—at least he takes no notice of it, and I am sure that if he had he would; but yet I am so discouraged by the failure of my little overture that I have not resolution enough to tell him that I had gathered them for him. Instead, I snub-

bedly and discomfortedly put them in my own breast.

Presently I speak again.

"Do you remember," I say,—"no, I daresay you do not, but yet it is so—it is a year to-day since you found me sitting on the top of the wall!—such a situation for a person of nineteen to be discovered in!"

At the recollection I laugh a little, and not bitterly, which is what I do not often do now. I can only see his profile, but it seems to me that a faint smile is dawning on his face, too.

"It was a good jump, was not it?" I go on, laughing again; "I still wonder that I did not knock you down."

He is certainly smiling now; his face has almost its old tender mirth.

"It will be a year to-morrow," continue I, emboldened by perceiving this, and beginning to count on my fingers, "since Toothless Jack and the curates came to

dine, and you stayed so long in the dining-room, that I fell asleep; the day after to-morrow, it will be a year since we walked by the river-side, and saw the goslings flowering out on the willows; the day after that it will be a year since——"

"Stop!" he cries, interrupting me, with a voice and face equally full of disquiet and pain; "do not go on, where is the use, I hate anniversaries."

I stop, quenched into silence; my poor little trickle of talk effectually dried. After a pause, he speaks.

"What has made you think of all these dead trivialities?" he asks in a voice more moved—or I think so—less frostily steady than his has been of late; "at your age, it is more natural to look on than to look back."

"Is it?" say I sadly, "I do not know; I seem to have such a great deal of time for *thinking* now; this house is so *extraordi-*

narily silent! did you never notice it?—of course it is large, and we are only two people in it, but at home it never seemed to me so *deadly* quiet, even when I was alone in the house."

"*Were* you ever alone?" he asks, with a smile. He is thinking of the noisy multitude that are connected in his memory with my father's mansion; that, during all his experience of it, have filled its rooms and passages with the hubbub of their strong-lunged jollity.

"Yes, I have been," I reply; "not often, of course! but several times, when the boys were away, and father and mother and Barbara had gone out to dinner; of course it seemed still and dumb, but not—" (shuddering a little)—"not so *aggressively, loudly* silent as this does!"

He looks at me, with a sort of remorseful pain.

"It *is* very dull for you!" he says com-

passionately; "shut up in endless duet, with a person treble your age! I ought to have thought of that; in a month or so, we shall be going to London, *that* will amuse you, will not it? and till then, is there any one that you would like to have asked here?—any friend of your own?—any companion of your own age?"

"No," reply I despondently, staring out of window, "I have no friends."

"The boys then?" speaking with a sudden assurance of tone, as one that has certainly hit upon a pleasant suggestion.

I shake my head.

"I could not have Bobby and the Brat if I would, and I would not have Algy if I could!" I reply with curt dejection.

"Barbara, then?"

Again I shake my head. Not even Barbara will I allow to witness the failure of my dreams, the downfall of my high castles, the sterility of my Promised Land.

"No, I will not have Barbara!" I answer; "last time that she was here——" but I cannot finish my sentence. I break away weeping.

CHAPTER IV.

"I think you hardly know the tender rhyme
Of 'Trust me not at all or all in all!'"

THERE are some wounds, oh my friends, that time, by himself, with no clever physician to help him, will surely cure. You all know that, do not you? some wounds that he will lay his cool ointment on, and by-and-by they are well. Amongst such are the departures hence of those we have strongly loved, and to whom we have always been, as much as in us lay, tender and good. But there are others that he only worsens —yawning gaps that he but widens; as if one were to put one's fingers in a great

rent, and tear it asunder. And of these last is mine.

As the year grows apace, as the evenings draw themselves out, and the sun every day puts on fresh strength, we seem to grow ever more certainly apart. Our bodies indeed are nigh each other, but our souls are sundered. It never seems to strike any one, it is true, that we are not a happy couple; indeed it would be very absurd if it did. We never wrangle—we never contradict each other—we have no tiffs; but we are *two* and not *one*. Whatever may be the cause, whether it be due to his shaken confidence in me, or (I myself assign this latter as its chief reason) to the constant neighbourhood of the woman whom I know him to have loved and coveted years before he ever saw me; whatever may be the cause, the fact remains; I no longer please him. It does not surprise me much. After all, the boys

always told me that men would not care about me; that I was not the sort of woman to get on with them! Well, perhaps! It certainly seems so.

I meet Mrs. Huntley pretty often in society now-a-days, at such staid and sober dinners as the neighbourhood thinks fit to indulge in, in this lenten season; and whenever I do so, I cannot refrain from a stealthy and wistful observation of her.

She is ten—twelve years older than I. Between her and me lie the ten years best worth living of a woman's life; and yet how easily she distances me. With no straining, with no hard-breathed effort, she canters lightly past me. So I think, as I intently and curiously watch her—watch her graceful, languid silence with women, her pretty, lady-like playfulness with men. And how successful she is with them! how highly they relish her! While I, in the uselessness of my round white youth, sit

benched among the old women, dropping spiritless, pointless "yeses" and "nos" among the veteran worldliness of their talk, how they crowd about her, like swarmed bees on some honied spring day! how they scowl at each other! and *finesse* as to who shall approach most nearly to her cloudy skirts!

Several times I have strained my ears to catch what are the utterances that make them laugh so much, make them look both so fluttered and so smoothed. Each time that I succeed, I am disappointed. There is no touch of genius, no salt of wit in anything she says. Her utterances are hardly more brilliant than my own.

You will despise me, I think, friends, when I tell you that in these days I made one or two pitiful little efforts to imitate her, to copy, distantly and humbly indeed, the fashion of her clothes, to learn the trick of her voice, of her slow, soft gait, of her

little surprised laugh. But I soon give it up. If I tried till my death-day, I should never arrive at anything but a miserable travesty. Before—ere Roger's return—I used complacently to treasure up any little civil speeches, any small compliments that people paid me, thinking, "If such and such a one think me pleasing, why may not Roger?" But now I have given this up, too.

I seem to myself to have grown very dull. I think my wits are not so bright as they used to be. At home I used to be reckoned one of the pleasantest of us: the boys used to laugh when I said things: but not even the most hysterically mirthful could find food for laughter in my talk now.

And so the days pass; and we go to London. Sometimes I have thought that it will be better when we get there. At least, *she* will not be there. How can she,

with her husband gnashing his teeth in lonely discomfiture at his exasperated creditors, and receiptless bills, in sultry St. Thomas? But, somehow, she is. What good Samaritan takes out his two pence and pays for her little apartment, for her stacks of cut flowers, for her brougham and her opera-boxes, is no concern of mine. But, somehow, there always *are* good Samaritans in these cases; and, let alone Samaritans, there are no priests or Levites stony-hearted enough to pass by these dear little lonely things on the other side.

We go out a good deal, Roger and I, and everywhere he accompanies me. It bores him infinitely, though he does not say so. One night, we are at the play. It is the Prince of Wales', the one theatre where one may enjoy a pleasant certainty of being rationally amused, of being free from the otherwise universal dominion of *Limelight* and *Legs*. The little house is

very full; it always is. Some of the royalties are here, laughing "*à gorge déployée!*" I have been laughing, too; laughing in my old fashion; not in Mrs. Zéphine's little rippling way, but with the thorough-paced unconventional violence with which I used to reward the homely sallies of Bobby and the Brat. I am laughing still, though the curtain has fallen between the acts, and the orchestra are fiddling gaily away, and the turned-up gas making everybody look pale. My opera-glasses are in my hand, and I am turning them slowly round the house, making out acquaintances in the stalls, prying into the secrets of the boxes, examining the well-known features of my future king.

Suddenly my smile dies away, and the glasses drop from my trembling hands into my lap. Who is it that has just entered, and is slipping across the intervening people in the stalls to his own seat, one of

the few that have hitherto remained vacant beneath us. Can I help recognizing the close-shorn cameo-like beauty—to me *no* beauty; to me deformity and ugliness—of the dark face that for months I daily saw by my fireside? Can there be *two* Musgraves? No! it is *he!* yes, *he!* though now there is on his features none of the baffled passion, none of the wrathful malignity, which they always wear in my memory, as they wore in the February dusk of Brindley Wood. Now, in their handsome serenity, they wear only the look of subdued sadness that a male Briton always assumes when he takes his pleasure. Do you remember what Goldsmith says—"When I see an Englishman laugh, I fancy I rather see him hunting after joy than having caught it."

As soon as my eyes have fallen upon, and certainly recognized him, by a double impulse I draw back behind the curtain of

the box and look at Roger. He, too, has seen him; I can tell it in an instant by his face, and by the expression of his eyes, as they meet mine. I try to look back unflinchingly, indifferently, at him. I would give ten years of my life for an unmoved complexion, but it is no use. Struggle as I will against it, I feel that rush, that torrent of vivid scarlet, that, retiring, leaves me as white as my gown. Oh! it *is* hard, is not it, that the lying changefulness of a deceitful skin should have power to work me such hurt?

"Are you faint?" Roger asks, bending towards me, and speaking in a low and icy voice; "shall I get you a glass of water?"

"No, thank you!" I reply, resolutely, and with no hesitation or stammer in my tone, "I am not at all faint?"

But, alas! my words cannot undo what my false cheeks, with their meaningless

red and their causeless white, have so fully done.

The season is over now: every one has trooped away from the sun-baked squares, and the sultry streets of the great empty town. I have never *done* a season before, and the heat and the late hours have tried me wofully. Often, when I have gone to a ball, I have longed to go to bed instead. And, now that we are home again, it would seem to me very pleasant to sit in leisurely coolness by the pool, and to watch the birth, and the prosperous short lives, of the late roses, and the great bright gladioli in the garden borders. Yes, it would have seemed very pleasant to me,—if——(why is life so full of *ifs?* "Ifs" and "Buts," "Ifs" and "Buts," it seems made up of them! Little ugly words! in Heaven there will be none of you!)—if—to back and support the outward good luck, there had been any inward content.

But there is none! The trouble that I took with me to London, I have brought back thence whole and undiminished.

It is September now; so far has the year advanced! We are well into the partridges. Their St. Bartholomew has begun. Roger is away among the thick green turnip-ridges and the short white stubble all the day. I wish to Heaven that I could shoot too, and hunt. It would not matter if I never killed anything—indeed, I think—of the two—I had rather not: I had rather have a course of empty bags and blank days than snuff out any poor little happy lives; but the occupation that these amusements would entail would displace and hinder the minute mental torments I now daily, in my listless, luxurious idleness, endure. I am thinking these thoughts one morning, as I turn over my unopened letters, and try, with the misplaced ingenuity and labour

one is so apt to employ in such a case, to make out from the general air of their exteriors—from their superscriptions—from their post-marks, whom they are from. About one there is no doubt. It is from Barbara. I have not heard from Barbara for a fortnight or three weeks. It will be the usual thing, I suppose. Father has got the gout in his right toe, or his left calf, or his wrist, or all his fingers, and is, consequently, fuller than usual of hatred and malice: mother's neuralgia is very bad, and she is sadly in want of change, but she cannot leave him. Algy has lost a lot of money at Goodwood, and they are afraid to tell father, etc., etc. Certainly, life is rather up-hill! I slowly tear the envelope open, and languidly throw my eyes along the lines. But, before I have read three words, my languor suddenly disappears. I sit upright in my chair, grasp the paper more firmly, bring it

nearer my eyes, which begin greedily to gallop through its contents. They are not very long, and in two minutes I have mastered them.

"My Dearest Nancy,

"I have *such* a piece of news for you! I cannot help laughing as I picture to myself your face of delight: I would make you guess it, only I cannot bear to keep you in suspense. *It has all come right! I am going to marry Frank, after all!* What *have* I done to deserve such luck? How can I ever thank God enough for it? Do you know that my very first thought, when he asked me, was, '*How* pleased Nancy will be!' You dear little soul! I think, when he went away that time from Tempest, that you took all the blame of it to yourself! Oh, Nancy, do you think it is wrong to be so *dreadfully* happy? Sometimes I am afraid that

I love him *too* much! it seems so hard to help it. I have no time for more now: he is waiting for me; how little I thought, a month ago, that I should be ending a letter to you for such a reason! When all is said and done, what a pleasant world it is! Do not think me quite mad. I know I *sound* as if I were!

"Yours,

"BARBARA."

My hand, and the letter with it, fall together into my lap: my head sinks back on the cushion of my chair; my eyes peruse the ceiling.

"Engaged to Musgrave! engaged to Musgrave! engaged to Musgrave!"

The words ring with a dull monotony of repetition through my brain. Poor Barbara! I think she would be surprised if she were to see my "*face of delight!*"

CHAPTER V.

MY eyes are fixed on the mouldings of the ceiling, while a jumble of thoughts mix and muddle themselves in my head. Was Brindley Wood a dream? or is this a dream? Surely one or other must be, and if this is not a dream, what is it? Is it reality, is it truth? And if it is, how on earth did anything so monstrous ever come about? How did he dare to approach her? How could he know that I had not told her? Is it possible that he cares for her really?—that he cared for her all along?—that he only went mad for one wicked moment? Is he sorry? how soon shall I have to meet him?

frown. "What I wish to know is, will *you* drive her?"

"I!!!"

"Yes, *you;* I know—" (speaking with a sort of hurried deprecation) "I know that you are not fond of her; she is not a woman that other women are apt to get on with; but it would not be for long! I tell you candidly" (with a look of sincere anxiety) "I do not half like trusting you to Parker!—I think you are as likely as not to come to grief."

"To come to grief!" repeat I, with a harsh dry laugh; "ha! ha! perhaps I have done that already!"

"But will you?" he asks eagerly; not heeding my sorry mirth, and taking my hand. "I would drive you myself, if I could, and if—" (almost humbly) "if it would not bore you; but you see—" (rather slowly) "about the carriage, she—she

"I have had news," I answer dubiously.

"If it is anything that you had rather not tell me," he says, hastily, observing my stupid and unintentional gesture, and I suppose afraid that I am about to drift into a second series of lies—"please do not. I would not for worlds thrust myself on your confidence!"

"It is no secret of mine," I answer coldly, "everybody will know it immediately, I suppose; it is that Barbara—" I stop, as usual choked as I approach the abhorred theme. "Will you read the letter, please? that will be better!—yes—I had rather that you did—it will not take you long; yes, *all* of it!" (seeing that he is holding the note in his hand and conscientiously looking away from it as if expecting limitation as to the amount he is to peruse).

He complies. There is silence—an ex-

pectant silence on my part. It is not of long duration. Before ten seconds have elapsed the note has fallen from his hand; and with an exclamation of the profoundest astonishment, he is looking with an expression of the most keenly questioning wonder at me.

"To MUSGRAVE!"

I nod. I have judiciously placed myself with my back to the light, so that if that exasperating flood of crimson bathe my face—and bathe it it surely will—is not it coming now?—do not I feel it creeping hotly up?—it may be as little perceptible as possible.

"It must be a great, great *surprise* to you!" he says interrogatively, and still with that sound of extreme and baffled wonder in his tone.

"Immense!" reply I.

I speak steadily if low; and I look determinedly back in his face. Whatever

colour my cheeks are—I believe they are of the devil's own painting—I feel that my eyes are honest. He has picked up the note, and is reading it again.

"She seems to have no doubt"—(with rising wonder in face and voice)—"as to its greatly pleasing *you!*"

"So it would have done at one time," I answer, still speaking (though no one could guess with what difficulty), with resolute equanimity.

"And does not it now?" (very quickly and sending the searching scrutiny of his eyes through me).

"I do not know," I answer hazily, putting up my hand to my forehead. "I cannot make up my mind, it all seems so sudden."

A pause. Roger has forgotten the partridges. He is sunk in reflection.

"Was there ever any talk of this before?" he says, presently, with a hesitating

and doubtful accent, and an altogether staggered look. "Had you any reason—any ground for thinking that he cared about her?"

"Great ground," reply I, touching my cheeks with the tips of my fingers, and feeling, with a sense of self-gratulation, that their temperature is gradually, if slowly, lowering, "*every* ground—at *one* time!"

"At *what* time?"

"In the autumn," say I, slowly; my mind reluctantly straying back to the season of my urgent invitations, of my pressing friendlinesses, "and at Christmas, and after Christmas."

"Yes?" (with a quick eagerness, as if expecting to hear more).

"The boys," continue I, speaking without any ease or fluency, for the subject is always one irksome and difficult to me—"the boys took it quite for granted—looked

upon it as a certain thing that he meant seriously until—"

"Until what?" (almost snatching the words out of my mouth).

"Until—well!" (with a short, forced laugh), "until they found that he did not."

"And—do you know?—but of course you do—can you tell me how they discovered that?"

He is looking at me with that same greedy anxiety in his eyes, which I remember in our last fatal conversation about Musgrave.

"He went away," reply I, unable any longer to keep watch and ward over my countenance and voice, rising and walking hastily to the window.

The moment I have done it, I repent. *However* red I was, *however* confused I looked, it would have been better to have remained and faced him. For several minutes there is silence. I look out at the

stiff comeliness of the various tinted asters, at the hoary-coloured dew that lies like a film along the morning grass. I do not know what *he* looks at, because I have my back to him, but I think he is looking at Barbara's note again. At least, I judge this by what he says next—"Poor little soul!" (in an accent of the honestest, tenderest, pity,) "how happy she seems!"

"Ah!" say I, with a bitter little laugh, "she will mend of *that*, will not she?"

He does not echo my mirth; indeed, I think I hear him sigh.

"'Romances paint at full length people's wooings,
But only give a bust of marriages!'"

say I, in soft quotation, addressing rather myself and my thoughts than my companion.

He has joined me; he, too, is looking out at the serene aster flowers, at the glittering glory of the dew.

"Since when have you learnt to quote

'Don Juan?'" he asks, with a sort of surprise.

"Since *when?*" I reply, with the same tart playfulness—"oh! since I married! I date all my accomplishments from then!—it is my anno Domini."

Another silence. Then Sir Roger speaks again, and this time his words seem as slow and difficult of make as mine were just now.

"Nancy!" he says, in a low voice, not looking at me, but still facing the flowers and the sunshiny autumn sward, "do you believe that—that—*this fellow* cares about her really?—she is too good to be made—to be made— a mere *cat's paw* of!"

"A *cat's paw!*" cry I, turning quickly round with raised voice; the blood that so lately retired from it rushing again headlong all over my face; "I do not know—what you mean—what you are talking about!"

He draws his breath heavily, and pauses a moment before he speaks.

"God knows," he says, looking solemnly up, "that I had no wish to broach this subject again—God knows that I meant to have done with it for ever—but now that it has been forced against my will—against both our wills—upon me, I must ask you this one question—tell me, Nancy—tell me truly *this* time"—(with an accent of acute pain on the word "*this*")—"can you say, *on your honour—on your honour*, mind—that you believe this—this man loves Barbara, as a man should love his wife?"

If he had worded his interrogation differently, I should have been sorely puzzled to answer it; as it is, in the form his question takes, I find a loophole of escape.

"As a man should love his wife?" I reply, with a derisive laugh, "and how is that? I do not think I quite know!—very dearly, I suppose, but not quite so dearly

as if she were his neighbour's — is that it?"

As I speak, I look up at him, with a malicious air of pseudo-innocence. But if I expect to see any guilt — any conscious shrinking in his face — I am mistaken. There is pain—infinite pain—pain both sharp and long-enduring in the grieved depths of his eyes; but there is no guilt.

"You will not answer me?" he says, in an accent of profound disappointment, sighing again heavily. "Well, I hardly expected it—hardly hoped it!—so be it, then, since you will have it so; and yet——" (again taking up the note, and reading over one of its few sentences with slow attention), "and yet there is one more question I must put to you, after all—they both come to pretty much the same thing. Why"—(pointing as he speaks to the words to which he alludes)—"why should *you* have taken on yourself the

blame of—of his departure from Tempest? what had *you* to say to it?"

In his voice there is the same just severity; in his voice there is the same fire of deep yet governed wrath that I remember in them six months ago, when Mrs. Huntley first threw the firebrand between us.

"I do not know," I reply, in a half whisper of impatient misery, turning my head restlessly from side to side; "how should I know? I am *sick* of the subject."

"Perhaps!—so, God knows—am I; but *had* you anything to say to it?"

He does not often touch me now; but as he asks this, he takes hold of both my hands, more, certainly, to prevent my escaping from under his gaze, than from any desire to caress me.

It is my last chance of confession. I little thought I should ever have another. Late as it is, shall I avail myself of it? Nay! if

not before, why *now*? Why *now*?—when there are so much stronger reasons for silence—when to speak would be to knock to atoms the newly-built edifice of Barbara's happiness—to rake up the old and nearly dead ashes of Frank's frustrated and, for aught I know, sincerely repented sin? So I answer, faintly indeed, yet quite audibly and distinctly,

"Nothing."

"NOTHING?" (in an accent and with eyes of the keenest, wistfulest interrogation, as if he would wring from me, against my will, the confession I so resolutely withhold).

But I turn away from that heart-breaking, heart-broken scrutiny, and answer,

"Nothing!"

CHAPTER VI.

"She dwells with beauty—beauty that must die,
And joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding Adieu!"

THUS I accomplish my second lie: I, that at home, used to be a proverb for blunt truth-telling. They say that "facilis descensus Averni." I do not agree with them. I have not found it easy. To me it has seemed a very steep and precipitous road, set with sharp flints that cut the feet, and make the blood flow.

I think the second falsehood was almost harder to utter than the first; but, indeed, they were both very disagreeable. I

cannot think why any one should have thought it necessary to invent the doctrine of a future retribution for sin.

It appears to me that in this very life of the present, each little delinquency is so heavily paid for—so exorbitantly overpaid, indeed. Look, for instance, at my own case. I told a lie—a lie more of the letter than the spirit—and since then I have spent six months—six months of my flourishing youth absolutely devoid of pleasure, and largely penetrated with pain.

I have stood just outside my Paradise, peeping under and over the flaming sword of the angel that guards it. I have been near enough to smell the flowers—to see the downy perfumed fruits—to hear the song of the angels as they go up and down within its paths; but I have been outside.

Now I have told another lie, and I suppose—nay, what better can I hope?—that I shall live in the same state of weary,

disproportioned retribution to the end of the chapter.

These are the thoughts, interspersed and diversified with loud sighs, that are employing my mind one ripe and misty morning a few days later than the incidents last detailed.

Barbara is to arrive to-day. She is coming to pay us a visit—coming, like the lady mentioned by Tennyson, in "In Memoriam"—not, indeed, "to bring her babe," but to "make her boast." And, how, pray, am I to listen with complacent congratulation to this boast? For the first time in my life I dread the coming of Barbara. How am I, whose acting on the few occasions when I have attempted it, has been of the most improbably wooden description—how am I, I say, to counterfeit the extravagant joy, the lively sympathy, that Barbara will expect—and naturally expect—from me?

I get up and look at myself in the glass. Assuredly I shall have to take some severe measures with my countenance before it falls under my sister's gaze. Small sympathy and smaller joy is there in it now—it wears only a lantern-jawed, lack-lustre despondency. I practise a galvanised smile, and say out loud, as if in dialogue with some interlocutor,

"Yes, *delightful!*—I am *so* pleased!" but there is more mirth in the enforced grin of an unfleshed skull than in mine.

That will never take in Barbara. I try again—once, twice—each time with less prosperity than the last. Then I give it up. I must trust to Providence.

As the time for her coming draws nigh I fall to thinking of the different occasions, since my marriage, on which I have watched for expected comings from this window—have searched that bend in the drive with impatient eyes—and of the dis-

appointment to which, on the two occasions that rise most prominently before my mind's eye, I became a prey.

Well, I am to be subject to no disappointment—if it *would* be a disappointment—to-day.

Almost before I expect her—almost before she is due—she is here in the room with me, and we are looking at one another. I, indeed, am staring at her with a blank and stupid surprise.

"Good heavens!" say I, bluntly; "what *have* you been doing to yourself? *how* happy you look!"

I have always known theoretically that happiness was becoming; and I have always thought Barbara most fair.

> "Fairer than Rachel by the palmy well,
> Fairer than Ruth among the fields of corn,
> Fair as the Angel that said, 'Hail!' she seemed,"

but *now*, what a lovely brightness, like that of clouds remembering the gone sun,

shines all about her! What a radiant laughter in her eyes! What a splendid carnation on her cheeks! (How glad I am that I did not tell!)

"Do I?" she says, softly, and hiding her face with the action of a shy child on my shoulders. "I dare say."

"*Good* heavens!" repeat I, again, with more accentuation than before, and with my usual happy command and variety of ejaculation.

"And *you?*" she says, lifting her face, and speaking with a joyful confidence of anticipation in her innocent eyes—"and *you?* you are pleased too, are not you?"

"Of course," reply I, quickly calling to my aid the galvanized smile and the unnatural tone in which I have been perfecting myself all the forenoon, "*delighted!* I never was so pleased in my life. I told you so in my letters, did not I?"

A look of nameless disappointment crosses her features for a moment.

"Yes," she says, "I know! but I want you to tell me again. I thought that you—would have such a—such a great deal to say about it."

"So I have!" reply I, uncomfortably, fiddling uneasily with a paper-knife that I have picked up, and trying how much ill-usage it will bear without snapping, "an immensity! but you see it is—it is difficult to begin, is not it? and you know I never was good at expressing myself, was I?"

We have sat down. I am not facing her. With a complexion that serves one such ill turns as mine does, one is not over fond of *facing* people. I am beside her. For a moment we are both silent.

"Well," say I, presently, with an unintentional tartness in my tone, "why do not you begin? I am waiting to hear all about it! Begin!"

So Barbara begins.

"I am afraid," she says, smiling all the

while, but growing as red as the bunch of late roses in my breast, "that I looked horribly *pleased!* One ought to look as if one did not care, ought not one?"

"Ought one?" say I, with interest, then beginning to laugh vociferously. "At least you were not as bad as the old maid who late in life received a very wealthy offer, and was so much elated by it that she took off all her clothes, and kicked her bonnet round the room!"

Barbara laughs.

"No, I was not quite so bad as that."

"And how did he do it?" pursue I, inquisitively. "Did he write or speak?"

"He spoke."

"And what did he say? How did he word it? Ah!"—(with a sigh)—"I suppose you will not tell me *that?*"

She has abandoned her chair, and has fallen on her knees before me, hiding her face in my lap. Delicious waves of colour,

like the petals of a pink sweet pea, are racing over her cheeks and throat.

"Was ever any one known to tell it?" she says, indistinctly.

"Yes," reply I, "*I* was. I told you what Roger said, word for word—all of you!"

"*Did* you?" (with an accent of astonished incredulity).

"Yes," say I, "do not you remember? I promised I would before I went into the drawing-room that day, and when I came out, I wanted the boys to let me off, but they would not."

A pause.

"I wish," say I, a little impatiently, "that you would look up! Why need you mind if you *are* rather red? What do *I* matter? and so—and so—you are—*pleased!*"

"*Pleased!*"

She has raised her head as I bid her, and on her face there is a sort of scorn at

the poverty and inadequacy of the expression, and yet she replaces it with no other; only the sapphire of her eyes is dimmed and made more tender by rising tears.

Clearly, we were never meant to be joyful, we humans! In any bliss greater than our wont, we can only hang out, to demonstrate our felicity, the sign and standard of woe.

"Nancy!"—(taking my hand, and looking at me with wistful earnestness)—"do you think it *can* last? Did ever any one feel as I do for *long*?"

"I do not know—how can I tell?" reply I, discomfortably, as I absently eye the two halves of my paper-knife, which, after having given one or two warning cracks, has now snapped in the middle. Then Roger enters, and our talk ends.

CHAPTER VII.

"God made a foolish woman, making me!"

"HAVE you any idea whom we shall meet?"

It is Barbara who asks this one morning at breakfast. The question refers to a three days' visit that it has become our fate to pay to a house in the neighbourhood—a house not eight miles distant from Tempest, and over which we are grumbling in the minute and exhaustive manner which people mostly employ when there is a question of making merry with their friends.

I shake my head.

"I have not an idea, that is to say,

except Mrs. Huntley, and she goes without saying !"

"Why ?"

"We are known to be such inseparables, that she is always asked to meet us," reply I, with that wintry smile, which is my last accomplishment. "We pursue her round the country, do not we, Roger ?"

Barbara opens her great eyes, but with her usual tact, she says nothing. She sees that she has fallen on stony ground.

"She is *the oldest friend we have in the world!*" contiuue I, laughing pleasantly.

Roger does not answer, he does not even look up, but by a restless movement that he makes in his chair, by a tiny contraction of the brows, I see that my shot has told. I am becoming an adept in the infliction of these pin-pricks. It is one of the few pleasures I have left.

The day of our visit has come. We have relieved our feelings by grumbling up

to the hall door. Our murmuring must per force be stilled now, though indeed, were we to *shout* our discontents at the top of our voices, there would be small fear of our being overheard by the master of the house, he being the boundlessly deaf old gentleman who paid his respects at Tempest on the day of Mrs. Huntley's first call, and insisted on mistaking Barbara for me. Whether he is yet set right on that head is a point still enveloped in Cimmerian gloom.

It is a bachelor establishment, as any one may perceive by a cursory glance at the disposition of the drawing-room furniture, and at the unfortunate flowers, tightly jammed, packed as thickly as they will go in one huge central beau-pot.

As we arrived rather late and were at once conducted to our rooms, we still remain in the dark as to our co-guests. Personally I am not much interested in the

question. There cannot be anybody that it will cause me much satisfaction to meet. It would give me a faint relief, indeed, to find that there were some matron of exalteder rank than mine to save me from my probable fate of bawling dark sayings at our old host, General Parker, from the season of clear soup to that of peaches and nuts. I dress quickly. The toilette is never to me a work of art. It is not that from any lofty moral stand-point I look down upon meretricious aids to faulty nature. If I thought that it would set me on a fairer standing with Mrs. Zéphine, I would paint my cheeks an inch thick; would prune my eyebrows; daub my eyes, and make my hair yellower than any buttercups in the meadow; but I know that it would be of no avail. I should still be, compared to her, as a sign-painting to a Titian. For a long time now I have cared nought for clothes. I used greatly to respect their

power, but they have done *me* no good; and so my reverence for them is turned into indifference and contempt.

I think that I must be late. Roger went down some minutes ago, at my request, so that there might be *one* representative of the family in time.

I hasten downstairs, fastening my last bracelet as I go, and open the drawing-room door. I was wrong. There is no one down yet: even Roger has disappeared. I am the first. This is my impression for a moment: then I perceive that there is some one in the bow window, half hidden by the drooped curtains; some one who, hearing my entry, is advancing to meet me. It is Musgrave! My first impulse, a wrong one, I need hardly say, is to turn and flee. I have even laid hold of the just abandoned handle when he speaks.

"Are you going?" he says in a low voice, marked by great and evidently un-

governable agitation, "do not! if you wish I will leave the room."

I look at him, and our eyes meet. He always was a pale young man—no bucolic beef-and-beer ruddiness about him—always of a healthy swart pallor; but now he is deadly white!—so, by-the-by, I fancy am I! His dark eyes burn with a shamed yet eager glow.

With the words and tones of our last parting ringing in our ears, we both feel that it would be useless affectation to attempt to meet as ordinary acquaintance.

"No," say I, faintly, almost in a whisper, "it—it does not matter! only that I did not know you were to be here!"

"No more did I, until this morning!" he answers eagerly; "this morning—at the last moment—young Parker asked me to come down with him—and I—I knew we must meet sooner or later—that it could not be put off for ever, and so I thought

we might as well get over it here as anywhere else!"

Neither of us have thought of sitting down. He is speaking with rapid, low emotion, and I stand stupidly listening.

"I suppose so," I answer hazily. I cannot for the life of me help it, friends. I am back in Brindley Wood. He has come a few steps nearer me. His voice is always low, but now it is almost a whisper in which he is so rapidly, pantingly speaking.

"I shall most likely not have another opportunity, probably we shall not be alone again, and I *must* hear, I *must* know—have you forgiven me?"

As he speaks, the recollection of all the ill he has done me, of my lost self-respect, my alienated Roger, my faded life pass before my mind.

"*That* I have not!" reply I, looking full at him, and speaking with a distinct and

heavy emphasis of resentment and aversion, "and by God's help, I never will!"

"You will *not!*" he cries, starting back with an expression of the utmost anger and discomfiture. "You will *not!* you will carry vengeance for one mad minute through a whole life! It is *impossible! impossible!* if *you* are so unforgiving, how do you expect God to forgive you your sins?"

I shrug my shoulders with a sort of despairing contempt. God has seemed to me but dim of late.

"He may forgive them or leave them unforgiven as He sees best; but—*I will never forgive you!*"

"What!" he cries, his face growing even more ash white than it was before, and his voice quivering with a passionate anger; "not for *Barbara's* sake?"

I shudder. I hate to hear him pronounce her name.

"No," say I, steadily, "not for Barbara's sake!"

"You will have to," he cries violently; "it is nonsense! think of the close connection, of the *relationship* that there will be between us! think of the remarks you will excite! you will defeat your own object!"

"I will excite no remark!" I reply resolutely. "I will be quite civil to you! I will say 'good morning' and 'good evening' to you; if you ask me a question I will answer it; but—I will *never* forgive you!"

We are standing, as I before observed, close together, and are so wholly occupied —voices, eyes, and ears—with each other, that we do not perceive the approach of two hitherto unseen people who are coming dawdling and chatting up the conservatory that opens out of the room; two people that I suppose have been there, unknown to us, all along. They have come quite

close now, and we must needs perceive them.

In a second our eager talk drops into silence, and we look with involuntary, startled apprehension towards them. They are Roger and Mrs. Huntley. This is why he acceded with such alacrity to my request. This is why he was so afraid of being late. He has been helping her to smell the jessamine, and to look down the datura's great white trumpet-throats.

Even at this agitated moment I have time to think this with a jeering pain. The next instant all other feelings are swallowed up in breathless dread as to how they will meet. My fears are groundless. On first becoming aware, indeed, whose *tête-à-tête* it is that he has interrupted, whose low, quick voices they are that have dropped into such sudden, suspicious silence at his approach—I can see him start perceptibly, can see his gray eyes

down on us again, gnashing its angry teeth; bellowing with a voice like ten million lost devils. And on its pinions what rain it brings; what stinging, lacerating, bitter rain! And now to add to our misfortunes, to pile Pelion on Ossa, we *lose our way*. Mr. Parker cannot be persuaded to abandon the idea of the short cut. The natural result follows.

If we were hopelessly bewildered—utterly at sea among the maze of lonely roads into which he has again betrayed us at high noon—what must we be now in the angry dark of the evening? This time we have to go into a field to turn, a field full of tussocks, which in the dark we are unable to see, and over which the horses flounder and stumble. However, now at length—now that we have wasted three-quarters of an hour, and that it is quite pitch dark—(I need hardly say that we have no lamps)—we have at length re-

little air of ease and liberty to its crowded inmates. Then, thank God, the others come in, and dinner is announced, and the situation is ended.

The old host, still under the influence of his hallucination, is bearing down like a hawk (with his old bent elbow extended) on Barbara, until intercepted and re-directed by a whispered roar and graphic pantomime on the part of his nephew. Then, at last, he realizes Roger's bad taste, and we go in.

As soon as we are seated, I look about me. It is a round table. For my part, I hate a round table. There is no privacy in it. Everybody seems eavesdropping on everybody else.

There are only eight of us in all—those I have enumerated, and Algy. Yes, he is here. Bellona is a goddess who can always spare her sons when there is any chance of their getting into mischief.

Roger has taken Mrs. Huntley. *That*, poor man, he could hardly help, his only alternative being his own sister-in-law. Musgrave has taken Barbara. He is still as white as the table-cloth, and hardly speaks. It is clear that *he* wlll not get up his conversation again, until after the champagne has been round. Algy has taken no one; and, consequently, a bear is an amiable and affable beast in comparison of him. I am placed between our host and his nephew. The latter comes in for a good deal of my conversation, as most of my remarks have to be taken up and re-bellowed by him with a loud emphasis, that contrasts absurdly with their triviality; and even then they mostly miscarry, and turn into something totally different.

Talking to the old man is not a dialogue, but a couple of soliloquies, carried on mostly on different subjects, which in vain try to become the same, between two

interlocutors. Through soup we prospered—that is to say, we talked of the weather; and though I said several things about it that surprised me a good deal, yet we both knew that we *were* talking of the weather. But since then we have been diverging ever more and more hopelessly. *He* is at the Shah's visit, and so he imagines am I. I, on the contrary, am at the Bishop of Winchester's death, and, for the last five minutes have been trying, with all the force of my lungs, and with a face rendered scarlet by the double action of heat and of the consciousness of being the object of respectful attention to the whole company, to convey to him that, in my opinion, the deceased prelate ought to have been buried in Westminster Abbey. I have at last succeeded, at least, in so far as to make him understand that I wish *somebody* to be buried in Westminster Abbey; but, as he still persists in thinking it the

Shah, we are perhaps not much better off than we were before. I lean back with a sense of despairing defeat, and, behind my fan, turn to the young man on my other side. He is a jolly-looking fellow, with an aureole of fiery red hair.

"Would you mind," say I, with panting appeal, "trying to make him understand that it *is not* the Shah!"

He complies, and while he is trying to make it clear to his uncle that he wrongs me in crediting me with any wish to thrust the Persian monarch among the ashes of the Plantagenets, I take breath, and look round again. Algy is eating nothing, and is drinking everything that is offered to him. His face is not much redder than Musgrave's, and he is glancing across the table at Mrs. Huntley, with the haggard anger of his eyes. Of this, however, she seems innocently unaware. She is leaning back in her chair; so is Roger. They are

talking low and quickly, and looking smilingly at each other. When does his face ever light up into such alert animation when he is talking to me? There can be no doubt of it! Why blink a thing because it is unpleasant? *I bore him.*

I have no intention of listening, and yet I hear some of their words—enough to teach me the drift of their talk. "Residency!" "Cawnpore!" "Simlah!" "*Cursed* Simlah!" "*Cursed* Cawnpore!" My attention is recalled by the voice of my old neighbour.

"Talking of that—" he says—(talking of *what*, in Heaven's name?)—"I once knew a man—a doctor, at Norwich, who did not marry till he was seventy-eight, and had four as fine children as any man need wish to see."

By the extraordinary irrelevancy of this anecdote, I am so taken aback, that, for a moment, I am unable to utter. Seeing,

however, that some comment is expected from me, I stammer something about its being a great age. He, however, imagines that I am asking whether they were boys or girls.

"Three boys and a girl, or three girls and a boy!" he answers, with loud distinctness—"I cannot recollect which; but, after all—" (with an anile chuckle)—"that is not the point of the story!"

I sink back in my chair, with a slight shiver.

"Give it up!" says my other neighbour, with a compassionate smile, and speaking in a voice not a whit lower than usual—"*I* would!—it really is no good!"

"Why does not he have a *trumpet?*" ask I, with a slight accent of irritation, for I have suffered much, and it is hot.

"He had one once," replies my companion, still pityingly regarding the flushed discomposure of my face; "but people

would insist on bawling so loudly down it, that they nearly broke the drum of his ear, and so *he* broke *it*."

I laugh a little, but in a puny way. There is not much laugh in me. Again I look round the table. Musgrave is better; he is a better colour than he was. Under the influence of Barbara's gentle talk, his features have reassumed almost serenity. Algy is *no* better. I see him lean back, and speak to the servant behind him. He is asking for more champagne. I wish he would not. He has had quite enough already. Roger and Mrs. Huntley are much as they were. They are still leaning back in their chairs—still looking with friendly intimacy into each other's eyes—still smiling. Again a few words of their talk reach me.

"Do you recollect?"

"Do you remember?"

"Have you forgotten?"

Clearly, they have fallen upon old times. I wish—I dearly wish—that I might bite a piece out of somebody.

CHAPTER VIII.

"I saw pale kings, and princes, too;
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all.
They cried, 'La Belle Dame, sans merci,
Hath thee in thrall.'"

THE long penance of dinner is over at last, thank God! I may intermit my hopeless roarings, melancholy as those of any caged Zoological beast. Roger and Zéphine must also fain suspend their reminiscences. There being no lady of the house, I have taken upon myself to hasten the date of our departure. Before Mrs. Zéphine has finished her last grape, I have swept her incontinently away into the drawing-room.

But I might as well have let it alone: almost before you could say "Knife!" they are after us. I suppose that when three are eager to come, and only two anxious to stay—(I acquit my old friend and his nephew of any over-hurry to rejoin us)—the three must needs get their way. Any how, here they all five are! I am so hot! so hot! Nothing heats one like bellowing and being miserable and a failure. I have again taken advantage of the mistressless condition of the establishment, have drawn back the window-curtains, and lifted the heavy sash. The night always soothes me. There is something so stilling in the far placidity of the high stars—in the sweet sharpness of the night winds. I have sat down on a couch in the embrasure, alone.

When the men come in, I remain alone. It does not at all surprise or much vex me. I have nothing pleasant to say to any one. Also, I think I must be almost

hidden by the droop of the curtains. Roger, indeed, sent his eyes round the room on his first entry, as if searching for something or somebody. It cannot be Mrs. Huntley, who is right under his nose, and who is, indeed, saying something playful to him over the top of her black fan. For once, he does not hear her. He is still looking. Then he catches a glimpse of my skirts, and comes straight towards me. Thank God! it *was* me he was looking for. I feel a little throb of disused gladness, as I realize this.

"Are not you cold?" he says, perceiving the open window.

"Not I!" reply I, brusquely—"nought never comes to harm."

"I wish you would have a shawl!" he says, as the evening wind comes, with the tartness of autumn, to his face.

"Why do not you say, '*do, for my sake!*' as Algy once said to me, when he mistook

me in the dark for Mrs. Huntley?" reply I, with a mocking laugh. "I am not sure that he did not add '*darling*,' but I will excuse *that!*"

At the mention of Algy, a shade crosses his face, and his eyes travel to where, in the dignified solitude of a corner, my eldest brother is sitting, biting his lips, and reading "Alice Through the Looking Glass," upside down.

"Foolish fellow! I wish he had not come!"

"I dare say he returns the compliment."

"I wish she would leave him alone!" he says, with an accent of impatience, more to himself than to me.

"That is so likely," say I, quickly, "so much her way, is not it?"

I suppose that something in the exceeding bitterness of my tone strikes him, or his eyes return from Algy to me.

"Nancy," he says, speaking with a sort

of hesitating impulse, while a dark flush crosses his face, "it has occurred to me once or twice—if the idea had been less unspeakably absurd, it would have occurred to me many times — that you are—are *jealous* of Zéphine and me!—You jealous of ME!!"

There is such a depth of emphasis in his last words—such a wealth of reproachful appeal in the eyes that are bent on me—that I can answer nothing. I say neither yea or nay. He has sat down on the couch beside me.

"Tell me," he says, with low quick excitement—"and for God's sake do not grow scarlet, and turn your head aside as you mostly have done—did you, or did you not know that—that *Musgrave* was to be here to-day?"

"I *did not—indeed* I *did not!*" I cry, with passionate eagerness; thankful for once to

be able to tell truth; "we none of us did—not even Barbara!"

He repeats my last words with a slightly sarcastic inflection, "*not even Barbara!*"

A moment's pause.

"Why did you stop talking so suddenly, the moment that we interrupted you?" he asks, with an abruptness that is almost harsh—"what were you talking about?"

Phew! how hot it is! even though one is by the open window—even despite the cool moistness of the night wind.

"I was—I was—I was—congratulating him!" I say, doing the very thing he has forbidden me, reddening and turning half away. He makes no rejoinder; only I hear him sigh, and put his hand with a quick impatient movement to his head.

"You believe me?" I ask timidly, laying hand on his arm.

"No, *I do not!*" he replies, shaking off

my touch, and turning his stern and glittering eyes full upon me. "I should be a *fool* and an *idiot* if I did!"

Then he rises hastily and leaves me. I watch him as he joins the other men. They are *all* round her now—all but Musgrave.

Algy has left his corner and his reversed picture-book, moved thereto by the unparalleled audacity of young Parker, who has pulled one of the sofa cushions down on the floor, and is squatting on it like a great toad at her feet, examining a gnat-bite on her sacred arm.

Even the old host is doing the agreeable according to his lights. In a very loud voice he is narrating a long anecdote about a pretty girl that he once saw at a windmill near Seville, during the Peninsular. With a most unholy chuckle he is trying to hint that there was more between him and the young lady than it well beseems him to

tell; but fortunately no one, but I, is listening to him.

I turn away my head, and look out of the window up at Charles Wain, and all my other bright old friends. No one is heeding me—no one sees me; so I drop my hot cheek on the sill.

Suddenly I start up. Some one is approaching me: some one has thrown himself with careless freedom on the couch beside me. It is Algy.

Having utterly failed in dislodging Mr. Parker from his cushion—having had a suggestion on his part on the treatment of the gnat-bite passed over in silent contempt, he has retired fron the circle in dudgeon.

"This is lively, is not it?" he says, in an aggressively loud voice, as if he were quarrelsomely anxious to be overheard.

I say "Hush!" apprehensively.

"As no one makes the slightest attempt

to entertain *us*, we must entertain each other, I suppose!"

"Yes, dear old boy!" I say, affectionately, "why not?—it would not be the first time by many."

"That does not make it any the more amusing!" he says, harshly. — "I say, Nancy"—his eyes fixing themselves with sullen greediness on the central figure of the group he has left—on the slight round arm (after all, not half so round or so white as Barbara's or mine) which is still under treatment—"*is* eau de cologne good for those sort of bites?—her arm *is* bad, you know!"

"*Bad!*" echo I, scornfully; "*bad!* why I am *all* lumps, more or less, and so is Barbara! Who minds *us!*"

"You ought to make your old man—'*auld Robin Grey*'—mind you," he says, with a disagreeable laugh. "It is *his* busi-

ness, but he does not seem to see it, does he? ha! ha!"

"I *wish!*" cry I, passionately; then I stop myself. After all, he is hardly himself to-night, poor Algy!

"By-the-by," he says presently, with a wretchedly assumed air of carelessness, "is it true—it is as well to come to the fountain head at once—is it true that *once*, some time in the dark ages, he—he—thought fit to engage himself to, to *her?*" (with a fierce accent on the last word).

A pain runs through my heart. Well, that is nothing new now-a-days. He too has heard it then.

"I do not know!" I answer faintly.

"What! he has not told you? *Kept it dark!* eh?" (with the same hateful laugh).

"He has kept nothing dark!" I answer indignantly. "One day he began to tell me something, and I stopped him! I would not hear; I did not want to hear, I

believe; I am sure that they are—only—only—old friends."

"*Old friends!*" he echoes with a smile, in comparison of which our host's satyr-leer seems pleasant and chaste. "*Old friends!* you call yourself a woman of the world" (indeed I call myself nothing of the kind) "you call yourself a woman of the world, and believe *that!* They looked like *old friends* at dinner to-day, did not they? A little less than kin, and more than kind! Ha! ha!"

CHAPTER IX.

PARTRIDGES are not General Parker's strong point, and the few he ever had his nephew has already shot. Roger must, therefore, for one day abstain from the turnip ridges. To amuse us, however, and keep us all sociably together, and bridge the yawning gulf between breakfast and dinner, we are to be sent on an expedition. Not only an expedition, but a picnic. This is perhaps a little risky in such a climate as ours, and in a month so doubtfully hovering on the borders of winter as September; but the sun is shining, and we therefore make up

our minds, contrary to all precedent, that he must necessarily go on shining.

Some ten miles away there is a spot whence one can see seven counties, not to speak of the sea, a mountain or two, and some other trifles; and thither Mr. Parker is kindly going to bowl us down on his coach.

A drive on a coach is always to me a most doubtful joy; the ascent, labour; the drive itself, long anxiety and peril; the descent, agony, and sometimes shame. However, that is neither here nor there. I am going. It is still half-an-hour to the time appointed for our departure, and I am sitting alone in my room when Roger enters.

"Nancy," he says, coming quickly towards me, "have you any idea what sort of a whip that boy is?"

"Not the slightest!" reply I, shortly.

I feel as hard as a flint to-day. Algy's

words last night seem to have confirmed and given a solider reality to my worst fears. He has walked to the window, and is looking out.

"Are you *nervous?*" say I, with a slightly sarcastic smile.

He does not appear to notice the sarcasm.

"Yes," he says, "that is just what I am! He is a mad sort of fellow, and a coach is not a thing to play tricks with!"

"No," say I, indifferently. It seems to me of infinitely little consequence whether we are upset or not.

"That is what I came to speak to you about!" he says, still looking out of the window. "Zéphine ——"

"Is nervous, too?" ask I, smiling disagreeably. "What a curious coincidence!"

"I do not know whether she is nervous or not!" he answers quickly; "I never

asked her, but it seems that Huntley never would let her go on a drag; he had seen some bad accident, and it had given him a fright ——"

"And so you and she are going to stay at home?" say I, coldly, but breathing a little heavily, and whitening.

"Stay at home!" he echoes, impatiently, "of course not; why should we? The fact is" (beginning to speak quickly in clear and eager explanation) "that I heard them talking of this plan yesterday, and so I thought I would be on the safe side, and send over to Tempest for the pony-carriage, and it is here now, and—"

"And you are going to drive her in it?" I say, still speaking quietly, and smiling. "I see! nothing could be nicer!"

"I wish to heavens that you would not take the words out of my mouth," he cries, losing his temper a little; while his brows contract into a slight and most unwonted

frown. "What I wish to know is, will *you* drive her?"

"I!!!"

"Yes, *you;* I know—" (speaking with a sort of hurried deprecation) "I know that you are not fond of her; she is not a woman that other women are apt to get on with; but it would not be for long! I tell you candidly" (with a look of sincere anxiety) "I do not half like trusting you to Parker!—I think you are as likely as not to come to grief."

"To come to grief!" repeat I, with a harsh dry laugh; "ha! ha! perhaps I have done that already!"

"But will you?" he asks eagerly; not heeding my sorry mirth, and taking my hand. "I would drive you myself, if I could, and if—" (almost humbly) "if it would not bore you; but you see—" (rather slowly) "about the carriage, she—she

asked me, and one does not like to say 'No' to such an old friend!"

Old friend! At the phrase, Algy's sneering white face rises before my mind's eye.

"Will you?" he repeats, looking pleadingly at me, with the gray darkness of his eyes.

"No, I will not!" I reply resolutely, and still with that unmirthful mirth; "whatever else I may be, I will not be a *spoil sport!*"

"A *spoil sport!*" he echoes passionately, while his face darkens, and hardens with impatient anger; "good God! will you *never* understand?"

Then he hastily leaves the room. And so it comes to pass that half-an-hour later, I am crawling up with a sick heart to the box seat, piteously calling on all around me to hold down my garments during my ascent. The grooms have let go the horses' heads, and have climbed up in

clusters; while the briony clasps the hawthorn-hedge, we cannot complain. Not only the *main* things of nature, but all her odds and ends are so exceedingly fair and dainty wrought.

It is one of those days that look charming, when seen through the window; bright and sunny, with lights that fly, and shadows that pursue; but it is a very different matter when one comes to *feel* it. There is a bleak keen wind that sends the clouds racing through the heavens, and that blows right in our teeth; nearly strangling me by the violence with which it takes hold of my head.

There has been no rain for a week or two, and it is a chalky country. The dust is waltzing in white whirlwinds along the road. High up as we are, it reaches us, and thrusts its fine and choking powder up our noses.

"I suppose," say I, doubtfully, looking

up at the shifting uncertainty of the heavens, and trying to speak in a sprightly tone, a feat which I find rather hard of accomplishment, with such a blast cutting my eyes, and making me gasp—"I suppose that it will not rain!"

"*Rain!* not it!" replies our coachman, with contemptuous cheerfulness.

"The glass was going down!" I say, humbly, "and I think I felt a drop just now!"

"*Impossible!* it *could* not rain with this wind."

He says this with such a jovial and robust certainty of scorn, that I am half-inclined to distrust the sky's evidence—to disbelieve even in the big drop that so indisputably splashed into my eye just now.

"But in case it *does* rain," continue I, pertinaciously, "I suppose that there is a house near, or some place where we can take refuge?"

"No, there is no house nearer than a couple of miles"—making the statement with the easiest composure—"but it will not rain."

"Perhaps"—say I, with a sinking heart—"there is a wood—trees?"

"Well, no, there is not much in the way of trees—except Scotch firs—there are plenty of them—it is a bare sort of place—that is the beauty of it, you know"—(with a tone of confident pride)—"there is a monstrously fine view from it!—one can see *seven* counties!"

"Yes," say I, faintly, "so I have heard!"

At this point, the old gentleman is understood to be bawling something from the back. By the utter morosity of Algy's face—faintly seen in the distance—I conjecture that it is a joke; and by the chuckling agony of zest with which the old man is delivered of it, I further conclude that it is something slightly unclean, but, thanks

to the wind, none of us overtake a word of it. The wind's spirits are rising. Its play is becoming ever more and more boisterous. It would be difficult to imagine anything disagreeabler than it is making itself; but perhaps it *will* keep off the rain. Thinking this, I try to bear its blows and buffets—its slaps on the face—its boxes on the ear—with greater patience. We have left the broad and safe high road, Mr. Parker having in an evil moment bethought himself of a short cut. We are, therefore, entangled in a labyrinth of cross-roads—finger-postless, guideless, solitary. *So* solitary indeed, that we meet only one vacant boy of tender years, of whom, when we inquire the way, the wind absolutely refuses to allow us to hear a word of the broad Doric of his answer. At last—after many bold and stout declarations on the part of Mr. Parker that he *will not* be beaten—that he knows the way as well as he does

his A B C—and that he will find it if he stays till midnight—he is compelled by the joint and miserable clamour of us all to turn back—(a frightful process, as the road is narrow, and the coach will not lock)—to retrace our steps, and take up again the despised high-road, where we had left it. These manœuvres have naturally taken some time. It is three o'clock in the afternoon before we at length reach the great spread of desolate broad moor-land, which is our destination. For more than an hour, absolute silence has fallen upon us. Like poor Yorick, we are "quite, quite chapfallen!" Even the gallant old gentleman could not make a dirty jest if he were to be shot for it. Mr. Parker alone maintains his exasperating good spirits. We find Roger and Mrs. Huntley sitting on the heather waiting for us. There is a good deal of relief—as it seems to me—in the former's eye, as he sees us appear on the

scene; and a good deal of another expression as he watches the masterly manner in which we pull up: all the four horses floundering together on their haunches; the leaders, moreover, exhibiting a mysterious desire to turn round and look in the wheelers' faces.

"Here we are!" cries Mr. Parker, joyously, "I have brought you along capitally, have not I?—but I am afraid we are a little late, eh, Mrs. Huntley? I hope we have not kept you long."

"*Is* it late?" she replies, with a smile and a fine hypocrisy—for she *looks* hungry—"I did not know; we have been quite happy!"

Roger has risen, and is coming to help me down, but I say, crossly, "Do not, please; Algy manages best!" Algy, however, has no intention of helping anybody down. He has helped *himself* down; and, without a word or a look to any of his fellow-travellers, has thrown himself down

on the heather at Mrs. Huntley's feet, and is relieving his mind by audible animadversions on our late triumphal progress. I am therefore left to the tender mercies of the grooms; at least, I should have been, if Mr. Musgrave had not taken pity on me, and guided my uncertain feet and the petticoats, which Zephyr is doing his playful best to turn over my head, down the steep declivity of the ladder. This, as you may guess, does not help to restore my equanimity. However, I am down now, on firm ground; and at least we are rid of the dust. My eyes are still full of grit, but I suppose they will get over that. I turn them disconsolately about.

On a fine sunny day—with butterflies hovering over the heather-flowers, and bees sucking honey from the gorse—with little mild airs playing about, and a turquoise sky shining overhead—it might be a spot on which to lie and dream dreams of Para-

dise; but *now!* The sun has finally retired, and hid his sulky face for the day; the heather is over; and though the gorse is not, yet it gives no fragrance to the raw air. All over the great rolling expanse there is a heavy leaden look, caught from the angry heavens above. The great clouds are gathering themselves together to battle; and the mighty wind, with nothing to check its progress, is sweeping over the great plain, and singing with eerie loud mournfulness.

I shudder.

"Where are the Scotch firs?" I say querulously, to Mr. Parker, who by this time had joined me. "You said there were plenty of them! where are they?"

"*Where?*" (looking cheerfully round), "oh, *there!*" (pointing to where one lightning-riven little wreck bends its sickly head to the gale). "Ah! I see there is only

one after all. I thought that there had been more."

My heart sinks. Is that one withered scathed little stick to be our sole protection against the storm, so evidently quickly coming up ?

" Fine view, is not it ?" pursues my companion, not in the least perceiving my depression, and complacently surveying the prospect. " Of course it might have been clearer, but after all, you get a very good idea of it."

I turn my faint eyes in the same direction as his. Down on the horizon the sullen rain clouds are settling, and to meet them, there stretches a dead, colourless flat, dotted with little round trees, little church spires, little houses, little fields, little hedges —one of those mappy views, that lack even the beauties of a map—the nice pink and green and blue lines which so gaily define the boundaries of each county.

"Very extensive, is not it?" he says, proudly, "you know you can see——"

"Seven counties!" interrupt I, sharply, snapping the words out of his mouth. "Yes, I know; you told me."

The horses have been led away to the distant ale-house. The coach stands forlorn and solitary on the moor. Some of us, looking at the threatening aspect of the weather, have suggested that *we* too should make for shelter; but this suggestion is indignantly vetoed by Mr. Parker.

"*Rain!* not a bit of it! It is not *thinking* of raining! The wind! what is the matter with the wind? Nice and fresh! Much better than one of those muggy days, when you can hardly breathe!"

CHAPTER X.

THE cloth is therefore laid, with the dead heather flowers beneath it, and the low leaden sky above. As large stones as can be found have to be sought on the moorland road to weight it, and hinder our banquet from flying bodily away. It is at last spread—cold lamb, cold partridges, chickens, mayonnaise, cakes, pastry—they have just been arranged in their defenceless nakedness under the eye of heaven, when the rain begins. And when it begins, it begins to some purpose. It deceives us with no false hopes—with no breakings in the serried

clouds—with no flying glimpses of blue sky. Down it comes, straight, *straight* down, on the lamb, on the mayonnaise, splash into the butter. Each of us seizes the viand dearest to his or her heart, and tries to shelter it beneath his or her umbrella. But in vain! The great slant storm reaches it under the puny defence. Even Mr. Parker has to change the *form* of his consolation, though not the spirit. He can no longer deny that it is raining; but what he now says is that it will not last—that it is only a shower—that he is very glad to see it come down so hard at first, as it is all the more certain to be soon over.

Nobody has the heart to contradict him, though everybody knows that it is a lie. Mrs. Huntley, at the first drop, has made for the coach, and now sits in it, serene and dry. Algy follows her, with a chicken and

a champagne bottle. I sit doggedly still, where I am, on the cold moor.

Roger has not spoken to me since my rude reception of him on arriving, but he now comes up to me.

"Had not you better follow her example?" he asks, speaking rather formally, and looking towards the coach, where, with smiling profile and neat hair, my rival is sitting, revelling among the flesh-pots.

Something in the sight of her sleek smooth tidiness, joined to the consciousness of my own miserable blowsed disorder, stings me more even than the raindrops are doing.

"Not I!" I answer, brusquely, "that is what I trust I shall never do!"

He passes by my sneer without notice.

"In this rain you will be drenched in two minutes."

"Après!"

"*Après*!" he repeats, impatiently, "*après*! you will catch your death of cold!"

"And you will be a widower!" reply I, with a bitter smile.

Barbara is as obstinate as I am. She, too, seems to prefer the spite of the elements to disturbing the *tête-à-tête* in the coach. Musgrave has made her as comfortable as he can, with her back against the poor little Scotch fir, and a plaid over both their heads.

The feast proceeds in solemn silence. Even if we had the heart to talk, the difficulty of making ourselves heard would quite check the inclination.

There are little puddles in all our plates —the bread and cakes are *pap*—the lamb is damp and flabby, and the mayonnaise is reduced to a sort of watery whey.

Mr. Parker is the only one who, under these circumstances, makes any attempt to pretend that we are enjoying ourselves.

"This is not so bad, after all," he says, still with that same unconquerable accent of joviality. He has to say it three times, and to put up his hands to his mouth like a speaking trumpet, before any one hears him. When they do "answer comes there none!"

I, indeed, am not in a position for conversation at the exact moment that the demand is made upon me. I have just come to the end of a long wrestle with my umbrella. It has at last got its wicked will, and has turned right inside out! All its whalebones are aspiring heavenwards. It is transformed into a melancholy *cup*—like a great ugly flower, on a bare stalk. I lay the remains calmly down beside me, and affront the blast and the tempest alone! I have a brown hat on—at least it *was* brown when we set off—I am just wondering, therefore, with a sort of stupid curiosity, why the *rill* that so plenteously

distils from its brim, and so madly races down my cold nose should be *sky blue*, when I perceive that Barbara has left her shelter, and her lover, and is standing beside me.

"Poor Nancy!" she says, with a softly compassionate laugh, "how wet you are! come under the plaid with me! you have no notion how warm it keeps one; and the tree, though it does not *look* much, saves one a bit too—and Frank does not mind being wet—come quick!"

I am too wretched to object. No waterproof could stand the deluge to which mine has been subjected. My shoulder-blades feel moist and *sticky:* my hair is in little dismal ropes, and dreadful runlets are coursing down my throat, and under my clothes.

Without any remonstrance, I snuggle under the plaid with Barbara—with a little of the feeling of soothing and dependence,

with which, long ago, in the dear old dead days at home, I used, when I was a naughty child, or a bruised child—and I was very often both—to creep to her for consolation.

Thanks to the wind, and to our proximity, we are able to talk without a fear of being overheard.

"You are wrong!" Barbara says, glancing first towards the coach, and then turning the serene and limpid gravity of her blue eyes on me; "you are making a mistake!"

I do not affect to misunderstand her.

"*Am I?*" I say, indignantly; "I am doing nothing of the kind! it is not only my own idea!—ask Algy!"

"*Algy!*" (with a little accent of scorn) "poor Algy!—he is in such a fit state for judging, is not he?"

We both involuntarily look towards him.

It is *his* turn now, and his morosity is

exchanged for an equally uncomfortable hilarity. His cheeks are flushed; he is laughing loudly, and going in heavily for the champagne. The next moment he is scowling discourteously at his old host, who, with his poor old chuckle entirely drowned, and overcome by an endless sort of choking monotony of cough, is clambering on tottery old legs into the coach, to try and get his share of shelter.

We both laugh a little; and then Barbara speaks again.

"Nancy, I want to say something to you! Just now I heard Roger ask whether there was a fly to be got at the public-house where the horses are put up, and it seems there *is;* and he has sent for it. You may think that it is for *her*, but it is not—it is for *you!* Will you promise me to go home in it, if he asks you?"

I am silent.

"Will you?" she repeats, taking hold of

one of my froggy hands, while her eyes shine with a soft and friendly urgency; "you know you always used to take my advice when we were little — will you?"

Somehow at her words, a little warmth of comfortable reassurance steals about my heart. At home she always used to be right: perhaps she is right now—perhaps *I* am wrong. I will be even better than her suggestion.

Roger is standing not far from us. The rain has drenched his beard and his heavy moustache: the great drops stand on his eyelashes, and on his straight brows. Perhaps I only imagine it, but to me he looks sad and out of heart. It is not the weather that makes him so, if he is. Much he cares for that!

I call him—"Roger!" My voice is small and low, and the wind is large and loud, but he hears me.

"Yes?" (turning at the sound with a surprised expression).

"May I go home in the fly?" I ask impulsively, yet humbly, "I mean with—with *her!*" (a gulp at the pronoun), then, under the influence of a fear that he may think that I am driven by a hankering after creature comforts to this overture, I go on quickly, "It is not because I want to be kept dry—if I were to be dragged through the sea I could not be wetter than I am—but if you wish—Barbara thought—Barbara said——"

I mumble off into shy incoherency.

"*Will* you?" he says, with a tone of eagerness and pleasure, which, if not real, is at least admirably feigned. "It is what I was just wishing to ask you, only" (laughing with a sort of constraint and a touch of bitterness) "I really was *afraid!*"

"Am I such a *shrew?*" I say, looking up at him with a feeling of growing light-

I cry, hurriedly. "I have altered my mind; I shall keep to the coach; that is" (with a nervous laugh and a miserable attempt at coquetry), "if Mr. Parker is not tired of me."

This is the way in which I take Barbara's advice. The fly arrives presently, and the original pair depart in it. Roger neither looks at nor speaks to me again; in fact he ignores my existence; although, under the influence of one of those speedy and altogether futile repentances which always follow hard on the heels of my tantrums, I have waylaid him once or twice in the hope that he would be induced to recognize it. But no! this time I have outdone myself. I have tried his patience a little too far. I am in disgrace.

It is long, *long* after their departure before *we* get under weigh. The grooms have either misunderstood Mr. Parker's directions, or are enjoying their mulled

beer over the pot-house fire too much to be in any violent haste again to meet the raw air and the persisting deluge.

It is past six o'clock before the horses arrive on the ground; it is half-past before we are off.

And meanwhile Mr. Parker has been rivalling Algy in the ardour with which he calls in the aid of the champagne to keep out the wet. At each fresh tumbler his joviality goes up a step, until at length it reaches a pitch which produces an opposite effect on me, and engenders a depressed fright.

"Barbara," say I, in a low voice, when at length the moment of departure draws near, and only Musgrave is within earshot—"Barbara, has it struck you? do not you think he is rather ——"

Barbara, however, is diffident of her own opinion, and repeats my question to her lover.

He shrugs his shoulders.

"Is he? I have not noticed him; nothing more likely; last time I saw him he was *flying!* It was in India at a great pig-sticking meeting, and after dinner he got up to the top of a big mango-tree, and tried to *fly!* Of course he fell down, but he was so drunk that he was not in the least hurt."

Mr. Musgrave seems to think this an amusing anecdote; but we do not.

"Why do not *you* drive?" I ask, contrary to all my resolutions addressing my future brother-in-law, and indeed forgetting in my alarm that I had ever made such. I am reminded of it, however, by the look of gratification that flashes—for only one moment and is gone—but still flashes into the depths of his great dark eyes.

"It is so likely that he would let me!" he says, laughing.

"I should not mind so much if I were

at the *back!*" I say piteously, turning to Barbara. "At the back one does not know what is coming, but on the box one sees whatever is happening."

"That is rather an advantage I think," she answers, laughing. "I do not mind; I will go on the box."

"Will you?" say I, eagerly. "*Do!* and I will take care of the old General at the back."

So it is settled. We are on the point of starting now. Mr. Parker is up and is already beginning to struggle with the hopeless muddle of his reins. I think we have perhaps done him an injustice; at all events, his condition is not at all what it must have been when he mounted the mango. Algy's morosity has returned tenfold, and he is performing the evolution familiarly known as "pulling your nose to vex your face." That is to say, he is standing about in the pouring rain utterly

unprotected from it. He entirely declines to put on any mackintosh or overcoat. Why he does this, or how it punishes Mrs. Huntley, I cannot say, but so it is.

We are off at last. I, in accordance with my wishes, up at the back, facing the grooms; but, not at all in accordance with my wishes, Mr. Musgrave and not the old host, is my companion.

"This is all wrong!" I cry, with vexed abruptness, as I see who it is that is climbing after me. "Where is the General? We settled that he—"

"I am afraid you will have to put up with me!" interrupts Musgrave coldly, with that angry and mortified darkening of the whole face, and sudden contraction of the eyeballs that I used so well to know. "We could not make him hear; we all tried, but none of us could make him understand." So I have to submit.

"Well, we are off now. The night is

coming quickly down: it will be *quite* dark an hour sooner than usual to-night, so low does the great black cloud curtain stoop to the earth's wet face. Ink above us, so close above us, too, that it seems as if one might touch it with lifted hand; ink around us; a great stretch of dull and sulky heather; and, maddening around us with devilish glee, hitting us, buffeting us, bruising us, taking away our breath and making our eyelids smart, is a wind—such a wind! I should have laughed if any one had told me an hour ago that it would rise. I should have said it was impossible, and yet it certainly has.

The wind which turned my umbrella inside was a zephyr compared to that which is now *thundering* round us. Sometimes for one, for two false moments, it lulls (the lulls are almost awfuller than the whirlwind that follows them), then with gathered might it comes tearing, howling, whooping

down on us again, gnashing its angry teeth; bellowing with a voice like ten million lost devils. And on its pinions what rain it brings; what stinging, lacerating, bitter rain! And now to add to our misfortunes, to pile Pelion on Ossa, we *lose our way*. Mr. Parker cannot be persuaded to abandon the idea of the short cut. The natural result follows.

If we were hopelessly bewildered—utterly at sea among the maze of lonely roads into which he has again betrayed us at high noon—what must we be now in the angry dark of the evening? This time we have to go into a field to turn, a field full of tussocks, which in the dark we are unable to see, and over which the horses flounder and stumble. However, now at length—now that we have wasted three-quarters of an hour, and that it is quite pitch dark—(I need hardly say that we have no lamps)—we have at length re-

gained the blessed breadth of the high road, and I think that not even our coachman, to whose faith most things seem possible, will attempt to leave it a second time. I give a sigh of relief.

"It is all plain sailing now!" Musgrave says, reassuringly.

"There is one bad turn," reply I, gloomily—"very bad, at the bottom of the village by the bridge."

We relapse into silence, and into our mutual battle with the elements. I have to grasp my hat firmly with one hand, and the side of the coach with the other, to prevent being blown off. If my companion were any one else, I should grasp *him*.

We are only a mile and a half from our haven now; the turn I dread is nearing.

"Are you frightened?" asks Musgrave, in a pause of the storm.

"*Horribly!*" I answer.

I have forgotten Brindley Wood—have

forgotten all the mischief he has done. I recollect only that he is human, and that we are sharing what seems to me a great and common peril.

"Do not be frightened!" he says, in an eager whisper—"you need not. I will take care of you!"

Even through all the pre-occupation of my alarm something in his tone jars upon and angers me.

"*You* take care of me!" I cry, scornfully. "How could you? I wish you would not talk nonsense."

We have reached the turn now! Shall we do it. One moment of breathless anxiety. I set my teeth and breathe hard. No, we shall not! We turn too sharp, and do not take a wide enough sweep. The coach gives a horrible lurch. One side of us is up on the hedge bank!—we are going over! I give a little agonized yell, and make a snatch at Frank, while my fingers

clutch his nearest hand with the tenacity of a devil fish. If it were his hair, or his nose, I should equally grasp it. Then, somehow—to this moment I do not know how—we right ourselves. The grooms are down like a shot, pulling at the horses' heads, and in a second or two—how it is done I do not see on account of the dark—but with many bumpings, and shouts and callings, and dreadful jolts, we come straight again, and I drop Frank's hand like a hot chestnut.

In ten minutes more we are briskly and safely trotting up to the hall door. Before we reach it, I see Roger standing under the lit portico, with level hand shading his eyes, which are intently staring out into the darkness.

"All right? nothing happened?" he asks, in a tone of the most poignant anxiety, almost before we have pulled up.

"All right!" replies Barbara's voice,

softly cheerful. "Are you looking for Nancy? She is at the back with Frank."

Roger makes no comment, but this time he does not offer to lift me down.

"Well, here we are!" cries Mr. Parker, coming beaming into the hall, with his mackintosh one great drip, laughing and rubbing his hands. "And though I say it that should not, there are not many that could have brought you home better than I have done to-night, and, I declare, in spite of the rain, we have not had half a bad day, have we?"

But we are all strictly silent.

CHAPTER XI.

"——— Peace, pray you, now,
No dancing more. Sing sweet, and make us mirth.
We have done with dancing measures: sing that song
You call the song of love at ebb."

YESTERDAY it had seemed impossible that we could ever be dry again, and yet to-day we are. Even our hair is no longer in dull discoloured ropes. A night has intervened between us and our sufferings. We have at last got the sound of the hissing rain and the thunder of the boisterous wind out of our ears. We have all got colds more or less. I am among the *less;*

in the gloom of the east, and to have the stars for companions.

His insane exposure of himself to the rage of the storm, on the night of the picnic, has combined, with previous dissipation, to lower his system so successfully as to render him an easy booty to the low crawling fever which, as so often in autumn, is stealing sullenly about, to lay hold on such as through any previous cause of weakness are rendered the more liable to its attacks. Slowly it saps the foundations of his being.

But Algy has always loved life, and had a strong hold on it; neither will he let go his hold on it now, without a tough struggle; and so the war is long and bitter, and we that fight on Algy's side are weak and worn out.

Sometimes the silence of the night is broken by the boy's voice calling strongly and loudly for Zéphine. Often he mis-

even had the shameless audacity to propose *another* expedition to-day. But we all rise in such loud and open revolt that he has perforce to withdraw his suggestion.

He must save his superfluous energy for the evening, when the neighbours are to come together, and we are to dance. This fact is news to most of us, and I think we hardly receive it with the elation he expects. There seems to be more of rheumatism than of dance in many of our limbs, and our united sneezes will be enough to drown the band. However, revolt in this case is useless. We must console ourselves with the notion that at least in a ball-room there can be neither rain nor wind—that we cannot lose our way or be upset, at least not in the sense which had such terror for us yesterday. Roger has gone over to Tempest on business, and is away all day. Mrs. Huntley sits by the fire, with a little fichu over her head, sipping a tisane; while

Algy, in undisturbed possession, and with restored but feverish amiability, stretches his length on the rug at her feet, and looks injured if Barbara or I, or even the footman with coals, enter the room.

As the day goes on there is not much to do; a new idea takes possession of Mr. Parker's active mind.

Why should not we all be in fancy-dress to-night? Well, not all of us, then,—not his uncle, of course, nor Sir Roger, but any of us that liked. *Trouble!* Not a bit of it. Why, the ladies need only rouge a bit, and put some flour on their heads, and there they are; and as for the men, there is a heap of old things up in the lumber-room that belonged to his great-grandfather, and amongst them there is sure to be something to fit everybody. If they do not believe him, they may come and see for themselves.

Such is the force of a strong will, that he

actually carries off the deeply unwilling Musgrave to inspect his ancestor's wardrobe. At first we have treated his proposal only with laughter, but he is so profoundly in earnest about it, and dwells with such eagerness on the advantage of the fact that not a soul among the company will recognise us—he can answer for *himself* at least—it is always by his *hair* (with a laugh) that people know *him*—that we at length begin to catch his ardour.

To tell truth, from the beginning the idea has approved itself to Barbara and me, only that we were ashamed to say so—carrying us back in memory as it does to the days when we dressed the Brat up in my clothes as *me*, and took in all the maid-servants. I think, too, that I have a little of the feeling of faint hope that inspired Balak when he showed Balaam the Israelites from a fresh point of view. Perhaps in carmine cheeks and a snow-white head,

I may find a little of my old favour in Roger's eyes.

Human wills are mostly so feeble and vacillating, that if one thorough-going determined one sticks to *any* proposition, however absurd, he is pretty sure to get the majority round to him in time; and so it is in the present case. Mr. Parker succeeds in making us all, willing and unwilling, promise to travesty ourselves. We are not to dress till after dinner; that is over now, and we are all adorning ourselves.

For once I am taking great pains, and—for a wonder—pleasant pains with my toilette. It is slightly delayed by a variety of unwonted interruptions—knocks at the door, voices of valets in interrogation and dialogue with my maid.

"If you please, Mr. Musgrave wants to know has Lady Tempest done with the rouge?"

(There is only one edition of rouge

which is travelling from room to room.)

Five minutes more another knock.

"If you please, Mr. Parker's compliments, and will Lady Tempest lend him a hair-pin to black his eyelashes."

I am finished now, quite finished—metamorphosed. I have suffered a great deal in the process of powdering, as I fancy every one must have done since the world began; the powder has gone into my eyes, up my nose, down into my lungs. I have breathed it, and sneezed it, and swallowed it, but "il faut souffrir pour être belle," and I do not grumble; for I *am* belle! For once in my life I know what it feels like to be a pretty woman. My uninteresting flax hair is hidden. Above the lowness of my brow there towers a great white erection, giving me height and dignity, while high aloft a little cap of ancient lace and soft pink roses, daintily perches. On my cheeks

there is a vivid yet delicate colour; and my really respectable eyes are emphasised and accentuated by the dark line beneath them. To tell you the truth, I cannot take my eyes off myself. It is *delightful* to be pretty! I am simpering at myself over my left shoulder, and heartily joining in my maid's encomiums on myself, when the door opens, and Roger enters. For the first instant I really think that he does not recognise me. Then

"*Nancy!*" he exclaims, in a tone of the most utter and thorough astonishment—"*is* it Nancy?"

"*Nancy*, at your service!" reply I, with undisguised elation, looking eagerly at him, with my blackened eyes, to see what he will say next.

"But — what — *has* — happened — to you?" he says, slowly, looking at me exhaustively from top to toe — from the highest summit of my floured head to

the point of my buckled shoes. "What have you got yourself up like this for?"

"To please Mr. Parker," reply I, breaking into a laugh of excitement. "But I have killed two birds with one stone; I have pleased *myself*, too! Did you ever see anything so nice as I look?" (unable any longer to wait for the admiration which is so justly my due).

"Not often!" he answers, with emphasis.

We had parted rather formally—rather *en délicatesse*—this morning, but we both seem to have forgotten this.

"I must not dance *much!*" say I, anxiously turning again to the glass, and closely examining my complexion—"must I?—or my rouge will *run!*"

After a moment,

"You must be sure to tell me if I grow to look at all *smeary*, and I will

run upstairs at once, and put some more on."

He is looking at me, with an infinite amusement, and also commendation, in his eyes.

"Why, Nancy," he says, smiling—"I had no idea that you were so vain!"

"No," reply I, bubbling over again into a shamefaced, yet delighted, laughter—"no more had I! But then I had no idea that I was so pretty, either."

My elation remains undiminished when I go downstairs. Yes, even when I compare myself with Mrs. Huntley, for, *for once*, I have beaten her! I really think that there can be no two opinions about it! indeed, I have the greatest difficulty in refraining from asking everybody whether there can.

She is not in powder. Her hair, in its present colour, is hardly dark enough to suit the high comb, and black lace mantilla,

which she has draped about her head, and the red rose in her hair is hardly redder than the catarrh has made her eyelids. A cold always comes on more heavily at night; and no one can deny that her whole appearance is stuffy and choky, and that she speaks through her nose.

As for me, I am not sure that I do not beat even *Barbara.* At least, the idea has struck me; and, when she herself suggests, and with hearty satisfaction, and elation not inferior to my own, insists upon it, I do not think it necessary to contradict her.

None of the three young men have as yet made their appearance; and the guests are beginning quickly to arrive. All the neighbours—all the friends who are staying with the neighbours to shoot their partridges—some soldiers, some odds and ends, *bushels* of girls—there always are bushels of girls somehow; here they come, smiling, settling their ties, giving their

skirts furtive kicks behind, as their different sex and costume bid them.

All the duties of reception fall upon the poor old gentleman, and drive him to futile wrath, and to sending off many loud and desperate messages to his truant heir. However, to do him justice, the poor old soul is hospitality itself, and treats his guests, not only to the best food, drink, and fiddling in his power, but also to all his primest anecdotes. No less than *three* times in the course of the evening do I hear him go through that remarkable tale of the doctor at Norwich, of the age of seventy-eight, and the four fine children.

To my immense delight, hardly anybody recognizes me. Many people look *hard*—really *very* hard—at me, and I try to appear modestly unconscious.

We are all in the dancing-room. The sharp fiddles are already beginning to squeak out a gay galop, and I am tapping

impatient time with my foot to that brisk emphasized music which has always seemed to Barbara and me exhilarating past the power of words to express.

I think that Roger perceives my eagerness, for he brings up a, to me, strange soldier, who makes his bow, and invites me.

I comply, with contained rapture, and off we fly. For I have pressingly consulted Roger as to whether I may, with safety to my complexion, take a turn or two, and he has replied strongly in the affirmative. He has, indeed, maintained that I may dance all night without seeing my rosy cheeks dissolve, but I know better.

The room is almost lined with mirrors. I can even perceive myself over my partner's shoulder as I dance. I can ascertain that my loveliness still continues.

How pleasant it is, after all, to be young! and how *delightful* to be pretty!

Does Barbara *always* feel like this? It seems to me as if I had never danced so lightly—on so admirably slippery and springy a floor, or with any one whose step suited mine better. His style of dancing is, indeed, very like Bobby's. I tell him so. This leads to an explanation as to who Bobby is, which makes us extremely friendly.

We are standing still for a moment or two to take breath—we are long-winded, and do not *often* do it; but still, once in a way, it is unavoidable—and everybody else is whirling and galloping, and prancing round us, like Bacchantes, or tops, or what you will, when, looking towards the door, I catch a glimpse of the three missing young men. They are dodging behind one another, and each nudging and pushing the other forward.

Clearly, they are horribly ashamed of themselves; and, from the little I see of them, *no wonder!*

"Here they are!" I cry, in a tone of excitement. "Look! do look!" for having at length succeeded in urging Mr. Parker to the front, they are making their entry, hanging as close together as possible, and with an extremely hang-dog air.

My partner has opened his eyes and his mouth.

"*What* are they?" he says, in a tone of extreme disapprobation. "*Who* are they? Are they *Christy Minstrels?*"

"Oh, do not!" cry I, in a choked voice, "I do not want to laugh, it will make them so angry—at least not Mr. Parker, but the others."

As I speak they reach me, that is, Algy and Mr. Parker do. Musgrave has slunk into a corner, and sits there, glaring at whoever he thinks shows a disposition to smile in his direction.

puts his arm round me, and prepares to whirl me again into the throng, "*how* I pity them! What on earth did they do it for?"

"Oh, I do not know," I reply, "for *fun*, I suppose!"

But I think that except in the case of Mr. Parker, who really enjoys himself, and goes about making jovial jests at his own expense, and asking everybody whether he is not immensely improved by the loss of his red hair, that there is not much fun in it.

Algy is as sulky and shamefaced as a dog with a tin kettle tied to his tail, and Mr. Musgrave has altogether disappeared.

The evening wears on. I forget my cheeks, and dance everything. *How* I *am* enjoying myself! Man after man is brought up to me, and they all seem pleased with me. At many of the things I say, they laugh heartily, and I do not wonder—

even to myself my speeches sound pleasant. What a comfort it is that for once in his life, Roger may be honestly proud of me. And he is.

It is surely pride, and also something better and pleasanter than pride that is shining in the smile with which he is watching me from the doorway. At least, during the first part of the evening he *was* watching me.

Is not he still? I look round the room, No, he is not here! he has disappeared! By a sudden connection of ideas, I turn my eyes in search of the high comb and mantilla. Neither are they here. Last time I saw them, they were sitting on the stairs, pathetically observing to their companion how hard it was that one might not feel cool without looking as if one were flirting.

Perhaps they are on the stairs still; perhaps she has gone to bed as she threat-

CHAPTER XV.

"Then, breaking into tears, 'Dear God,' she cried, 'and must we see
All blissful things depart from us, or e'er we go to Thee?
We cannot guess Thee in the wood, or hear Thee in the wind:
Our cedars must fall round us e'er we see the light behind.
Ay, sooth, we feel too strong in weal to need Thee on that road;
But, woe being come, the soul is dumb that crieth not on God.'"

I AM twenty years old now, barely twenty; and seventy is the appointed boundary of man's date, often exceeded by ten, by fifteen years. During all these fifty—perhaps sixty—years, I shall have to do without Barbara. I have not yet arrived at

me, but that his clothes are so tight, he really *dare not.* Then he disappears among the throng, with an uncomfortable sidelong movement, which endeavours to shield the incompleteness of his back view.

I am still smiling at his dilemma, when another voice sounds in my ears.

"You are not dancing?"

It is Musgrave. He has had the vanity to take off his absurd costume, and to wash the powder from his hair, and the rouge from his cheeks. He stands before me now, cool, pale, and civilized, in the faultless quietness of his evening dress.

"No," reply I, shortly, "I am not!"

"Will you dance with me?"

I am not looking at him; indeed, I never look at him now, if I can help; but I hear a sort of hesitating defiance in his tone.

"No, thank you"—(still more shortly)—"I might have danced, if I had liked: it

is not for want of asking"—(with a little childish vanity)—"but I do not wish."

"Do not you mean to dance any more this evening, then?"

"I do not know; that is as may be!"

I have almost turned my back upon him, and my eyes are following—not perhaps quite without a movement of envy—my various acquaintances, scampering, coupled in mad embraces. I think that he is gone, but I am mistaken.

"Will you at least let me take you in to supper?" in a tone whose formality is strongly dashed with resentment.

I wish that I did not know his voice so hatefully well: all its intonations and inflections are as familiar to me as Roger's.

"I do not want any supper," I answer, petulantly, turning the back of my head and all my powdered curls towards him; "I never eat supper at a ball; I like to

stand here; I like to watch the people—to watch Barbara!"

This at least is true. To see Barbara dance has always given, and does even now give, me the liveliest satisfaction. No one holds their head so prettily as Barbara; no one moves so smoothly, and with so absolutely innocent a gaiety. The harshest, prudishest adversary of valsing, were he to see Barbara valse, would be converted to thinking it the most modest of dances. Mr. Musgrave is turning away. Just as he is doing so, an idea strikes me. Perhaps they are in the supper-room.

"After all," say I, unceremoniously, and forgetting for the moment who it is that I am addressing, "I do not mind if I do have something; I—I—am rather hungry."

I put my hand on his arm, and we walk off.

The supper-room is rather full—(when, indeed, was a supper-room known to be

empty ?)—some people are sitting—some standing—it is therefore a little difficult to make out who is here, and who is not. In total and absolute forgetfulness of the supposed cause that has brought me here, I stand eagerly staring about, under people's arms—over their shoulders. So far, I do not see them. I am recalled by Mr. Musgrave's voice, coldly polite :

" Will not you sit down ?"

" No, thank you," reply I, bending my neck back to get a view behind an intervening group ; " I had rather stand."

" Are you looking for any one ?"

Again I wish that I did not know his voice so well—that I did not so clearly recognise that slightly guardedly-malicious intonation.

" Looking for any one ?" I cry sharply, and reddening even through my rouge—" of course not !—whom should I be looking for ?—but, after all, I do not think I

care about having anything!—there's—there's nothing that I fancy."

This is a libel at once upon myself and on General Parker's hospitality. He answers nothing, and perhaps the smile—almost imperceptible—which I fancy in his eyes, and in the clean curves of his lips, exists only in my imagination. He again offers me his arm, and I again take it. I have clean forgotten his existence. His arm is no more to me than if it were a piece of wood.

"Where are they? where can they be?" is the thought that engrosses all my attention.

I hardly notice that he is leading me away from the ball-room—down the long corridor, on which almost all the sitting-rooms open. They are, one and all, lit up to-night; and in each of them there are guests. I glance in at the drawing-room: they are not there! We take a turn in the

conservatory. We find Mr. Parker sitting very carefully upright, for his costume does not allow of any lolling, or of any tricks being played with it, under a magnolia, with a pretty girl—(I wonder, have *my* cheeks grown as streaky as his ?)—but they are not there. We go back to the corridor. We peep into the library: two or three bored old gentlemen—martyrs to their daughters' prospects—yawning over the papers and looking at their watches. They are not here. Where *can* they be ? Only one room yet remains—one room at the very end of the passage—the billiard-room, shut off by double doors to deaden the sound of the balls. One of the double doors is wide open, the other closed—not absolutely *shut*, but not ajar. Musgrave pushes it, and we look in. I do not know why I do. I do not expect to see any one. I hardly think it will be lit, probably blank darkness will meet us. But it is not so.

The lamps above the table are shining subduedly under their green shades; and on a couch against the wall two people are sitting. They *are* here. I have found them at last.

Evidently they are in deep and absorbing talk. Roger's elbow rests on the top of the couch. His head is on his hand. On his face there is an expression of grave and serious concern; and she—she—is it *possible?*—she is evidently—plainly weeping. Her face is hidden in her handkerchief, and she is sobbing quietly, but quite audibly. In an instant, with ostentatious hurry, Musgrave has re-closed the door, and we stand together in the passage.

I am not mistaken now: I could not be: that can be no other expression than triumph that so darkly shines in his great and eager eyes.

"You *knew* they were there!" I cry in a whisper of passionate resentment, snatching

my hand from his arm ; "you brought me here *on purpose!*"

Then, regardless of appearances, I turn quickly away, and walk back down the passage alone!

CHAPTER XII.

THIS is how the ball ends for me. As soon as I am out of sight, I quicken my walk into a run, and flying up the stairs, take refuge in my bedroom. Nor do I emerge thence again. The ball itself goes on for hours. The drawing-room is directly beneath me. It seems to me as if the sound of the fiddling, of the pounding, scampering feet, would never, never end.

I believe, at least I hear afterwards, that Mr. Parker, whose spirits go on rising with the steady speed of quicksilver in fine

I have lit the candles, and am looking at myself in the cheval-glass. What has become of my beauty, pray? The powder is shaken from my hair; it no longer rises in a white and comely pile; the motion of dancing has loosened and tossed it; it has a look of dull gray dishevelment. The rouge has almost disappeared; melted away, or sunk in; there never was a great deal of it, never the generous abundance that adorned Mr. Parker's face. I cannot help laughing, even now, as I think of the round red smouch that so artlessly ornamented each of his cheeks.

I neither ring for my maid, nor attempt to undress myself. I either keep walking restlessly to and fro, or I sit by the casement, while the cold little wind lifts my dusty hair, or blows against my hot stiff eyes; or I stand stupidly before the glass, bitterly regarding the ruins of my one night's fairness. I do not know for how

long; it must be hours, but I could not say how many.

The fiddles' shrill voices grow silent at last; the bounding and stamping cease; the departing carriage-wheels grind and crunch on the gravel drive. I shall not have much longer to wait; he will be coming soon now. But there is yet another interval. In ungovernable impatience, I open my door and listen. It seems to me that there reaches me from the hall, the sound of voices in loud and angry altercation; it is too far off for me to distinguish to whom they belong. Then there is silence again, and then at last—at last Roger comes. I hear his foot along the passage, and run to the door to intercept him, on his way to his dressing-room. He utters an exclamation of surprise on seeing me.

"Not in bed yet? Not undressed? They told me that you were tired and had gone to bed hours ago!"

"Did they?"

I can say only these two little words. I am panting so, as if I had run hard. We are both in the room now, and the door is shut. I suppose I look odd; wild and gray and haggard through the poor remains of my rouge.

"You are late," I say presently, in a voice of low constraint, "are not you? everybody went some time ago."

"I know," he answers, with a slight accent of irritation; "it is Algy's fault! I do not know what has come to that boy; he hardly seems in his right mind to-night; he has been trying to pick a quarrel with Parker, because he lit Mrs. Huntley's candle for her."

"Yes," say I, breathing short and hard. Has not he himself introduced her name?

"And you know Parker is always ready for a row—loves it—and as he is as screwed to-night as he well can be, it has

been as much as we could do to make them keep their hands off each other!" After a moment he adds, "Silly boy! he has been doing his best to fall out with *me*, but I would not let him compass that."

"Has he?"

Roger has begun to walk up and down, as I did a while ago; on his face a look of unquiet discontent.

"It was a mistake his coming here this time," he says, with a sort of anger, and yet compassion, in his tone. "If he had had a grain of sense he would have stayed away!"

"It is a thousand pities that you cannot send us *all* home again!" I say, with a tight pale smile—"send us packing back again, Algy and Barbara and *me*—replace me on the wall among the broken bottles, where you found me."

My voice shakes as I make this dreary joke.

"Why do you say that?" he cries, passionately. "Why do you *torment* me? You know as well as I do that it is impossible—out of the question! You know that I am no more able to free you than——"

"You *would*, then, if you *could?*" cry I, breathing short and hard. "You *own* it!"

For a moment he hesitates; then—

"Yes," he says, firmly, "I would! I did not think at one time that I should ever have lived to say it, but I *would*."

"You are at least candid," I answer, with a sort of smothered sob, turning away.

"Nancy!" he cries, following me, and taking hold of my cold and clammy hands, while what *looks*—what, at least, I should have once said *looked*—like a great yearning fills his kind and handsome eyes; "we are not very happy, are we? Perhaps, child, we never shall be now—often

I think so. Well, it cannot be helped, I suppose. We are not the first, and we shall not be the last!" (with a deep and bitter sigh). "But indeed, I think, dear, that we are unhappier than we need be."

I shrug my shoulders with a sort of careless despair.

"Do you think so? I fancy not. Some people have their happiness thinly spread over their whole lives, like bread and scrape!" I say, with a homely bitterness. "Some people have it in a *lump!* that is all the difference! I had mine in a *lump* —all crowded into nineteen years that is, nineteen *very good years!*" I end, sobbing.

He still has hold of my hands. His face is full of distress; indeed, distress is too weak a word—of acute and utter pain.

"What makes you talk like this *now*, to-night?" he asks, earnestly. "I have been deceiving myself with the hope that you were having *one* happy evening, as I

watched you dancing—did you see me? I dare say not—of course you were not thinking of me. You looked like the old light-hearted Nancy that lately I have been thinking was gone for ever!"

"Did I?" say I, dejectedly, slowly drawing my hands from his, and wiping my wet eyes with my pocket-handkerchief.

"*Any one* would have said that you were enjoying yourself," he pursues eagerly—"*were* not you?"

"Yes," say I, ruefully, "I was, very much." Then, with a sudden change of tone to that sneering key which so utterly—so unnaturally misbecomes me—"And *you?*"

"*I!*" He laughs slightly. "I am a little past the age when one derives any very vivid satisfaction from a ball; and yet," with a softening of eye and voice, "I liked looking at you too!"

"And it was pleasant in the billiard-room, was not it?" say I, with a stiff

and coldly ironical smile—"so quiet and shady."

"*In the billiard-room?*"

"Do you mean to say," cry I, my factitious smile vanishing, and flashing out into honest, open passion, "that you mean to deny that you were there?"

"Deny it!" he echoes, in a tone of the deepest and most displeased astonishment; "of course not! Why should I? What would be the object? And if there *were* one—have *I* ever told *you* a lie?" with a reproachful accent on the pronouns. "I was there half an hour, I should think."

"And why were you?" cry I, losing all command over myself. "What business had you? Were not there plenty of other rooms—rooms where there were lights and people?"

"Plenty!" he replies, coldly, still with that look of heavy displeasure; "and for my part I had far rather have stayed there.

I went into the billiard-room because Mrs. Huntley asked me to take her. She said she was afraid of the draughts anywhere else."

"Was it the *draughts* that were making her cry so bitterly, pray?" say I, my eyes—dry now, achingly dry—flashing a wretched hostility back into his. "I have heard of their making people's eyes run indeed, but I never heard of their causing them to sob and moan."

He has begun again to tramp up and down, and utters an exclamation of weary impatience.

"How could I help her crying?" he asks, with a tired irritation in his tone. "Do you think I *enjoyed* it? I *hate* to see a woman weep! it makes me *miserable!* it always did; but I have not the slightest objection—why, in Heaven's name, should I?—to tell you the cause of her tears. She was talking to me about her child."

"Her *child!*" repeat I, in an accent of the sharpest, cuttingest scorn. "And you were taken in! I knew that she made capital out of that child, but I thought that it was only neophytes like Algy for whose benefit it was trotted out! I thought that *you* were too much of a man of the world, that she knew *you* too well——" I laugh derisively.

"Would you like to know the true history of the little Huntley?" I go on, after a moment. "Would you like to know that its grandmother, arriving unexpectedly, found it running wild about the lanes, a little neglected heathen, out at elbows, and with its frock up to its knees, and that she took it out of pure pity, Mrs. Zéphine not making the slightest objection, but, on the contrary, being heartily glad to be rid of it—do you like to know *that?*"

"How do *you* know it?" (speaking quickly)—"how did *you* hear it?"

"I was told."

"But *who* told you?"

"That is not of the slightest consequence."

"I wish to know."

"Mr. Musgrave told me."

I can manage his name better than I used, but even now I redden. For once in his life, Roger, too, sneers as bitterly as I myself have been doing.

"Mr. Musgrave seems to have told you a good many things."

This is carrying the war into the enemy's quarters, and so I feel it. For the moment it shuts my mouth.

"Who is it that has put such notions into your head?" he asks, with gathering excitement, speaking with rapid passion. "*Some one* has! I am as sure as that I stand here that they did not come there of themselves. There was no room for such

suspicions in the pure soul of the girl I married."

I make no answer.

"If it were not for the *misery* of it," he goes on, that dark flush that coloured his bronzed face the other night again spreading over it, "I could *laugh* at the gross absurdity of the idea! To begin such fooleries at *my* age! Nancy, Nancy!" his tone changing to one of reproachful, heart-rending appeal—"has it never struck you that it is a little hard, considering all things, that *you* should suspect *me?*"

Still I am silent.

"Tell me what you wish me to do!" he cries, with passionate emphasis. "Tell me what you wish me to leave undone! I will do it! I will leave it undone! You are a little hard upon me, dear; indeed you are—some day I think that you will see it—but it was not your own thought! I know that as well as if you had told me!

It was suggested to you—*by whom* you best know, and whether his words or mine are most worthy of credit!"

He is looking at me with a fixed pathetic mournfulness. There is in his eyes a sort of hopelessness, and yet patience.

"We are *miserable*, are not we?" he goes on, in a low voice—"*most* miserable! and it seems to me that every day we grow more so, that every day there is a greater dissonance between us! For my part, I have given up the hope that we can ever be happier! I have wondered that I should have entertained it. But, at least, we might have *peace!*"

There is such a depth of depression, such a burden of fatigue in his voice, that the tears rise in my throat and choke the coming speech.

"At least you are undeceived about me, are not you?" he says, looking at me with

an eager and yet almost confident expectation. "At least, you believe me!"

But I answer nothing. It is the tears that keep me dumb, but I think that he thinks me still unconvinced, for he turns away with a groan.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I made a posy while the day ran by,
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
My life within this band;
But time did beckon to the flowers, and they
By noon most cunningly did steal away,
And wither'd in my hand!"

WE are home again now; we have been away only three days after all, but they seem to me like three years—three disastrous years—so greatly during them has the gulf between Roger and me widened and deepened. Looking back on what it was before that, it seems to me now to have been but a shallow and trifling ditch, com-

pared to the abyss that it is now. We left Mr. Parker standing at the hall door, his red hair flaming bravely in the morning sun, loudly expressing his regret at our departure, and trying to extract an unlikely promise from us that we will come back next week.

During the drive home we none of us hardly speak. Roger and I are gloomily silent, Barbara sympathetically so. Barbara has the happiest knack of being in tune with every mood; she never jostles with untimely mirth against any sadness. I think she sees that my wounds are yet too fresh and raw to bear the gentlest handling, so she only pours upon them the balm of her tender silence. There is none of the recognised and allowed selfishness of a betrothed person about Barbara. Sometimes I almost forget that she *is* engaged, so little does she ever bring herself into the foreground; and yet, if it were not for us, I

As his eyes in the patient mournfulness of their reproachful appeal, answer again in memory the shrewish violence of my accusations on the night of the Ball—the last embers of my jealousy die. He does not love me as he did; of that I am still persuaded. There is now, perhaps, there always will be, a film, a shade between us.

By my peevish tears, by my mean and sidelong reproaches, by my sulky looks I have necessarily diminished, if not quite squandered, the stock of hearty, wholesome, honest love that on that April day he so diffidently laid at my feet. I have already marred and blighted a year and three quarters of his life. As I recollect how much older than me he is, how much time I have already wasted, a pang of remorse, sharp as any knife, runs through my heart; a great and mighty yearning to go back to him at once, to begin over again *at once, this very minute*, to begin over again—over-

Roger enters. It surprises me, as it is the first time that he has done it since our return.

We are on the formalest terms now; perhaps so best; and if we have to address each other, do it in the shortest little icy phrases. When we are *obliged* to meet, as at dinner, &c., we both talk resolutely to Barbara. He does not look icy now; disturbed rather, and anxious. He has an open note in his hand.

"Nancy," he says, coming quickly up to me, "did you know that Algy was at Laurel Cottage?"

"Not I!" I answer, tartly. "He does not favour me with his plans; tiresome boy. He is more bother than he is worth."

"Hush!" he says, hastily yet gently. "Do not say anything against him; you will be sorry if you do. He is *ill.*"

"*Ill!*" repeat I, in a tone of consternation, for amongst us it is a new word, and

churchyard wall above her head, our Barbara is taking her rest.

As I near the grave, I see that I am not its only visitor. Some one, a man, is already there, leaning pensively on the railings that surround it, with his eyes fixed on the dark and winterly earth, and on the newly-planted, flagging flowers. It is Roger. As he hears my approaching steps, the swish of my draperies, he turns; and by the serene and lifted gravity of his eyes, I see that he has been away in Heaven with Barbara. He does not speak as I come near; only he opens his arms joyfully, and yet a little diffidently, too, and I fly to them.

"Roger!" I cry, passionately, with a greedy yearning for human love here—at this very spot, where so much of the love of my life lies in death's austere silence at my feet—"love me a little—*ever so little!* I know I am not very lovable, but you once liked me, did not you?—not nearly

you that I should stay and nurse him; but, alas! I know by experience the sharpness of the world's tongue, and in my situation I dare not brave it; nor would it be fair upon Mr. Huntley that I should. Ah! what a different world it would be if one might follow one's own impulses; but one may not, and so I am leaving at once. I shall be gone before this reaches you."

I throw the letter down on the floor with a gesture of raging disgust.

"Gone!" I say, with flashing eyes and lifted voice; "is it possible that after having decoyed him there, she is leaving him now to die, *alone?*"

"So it seems," he answers, looking back at me with an indignation hardly inferior to my own. "I could not have believed it of her."

"He will die!" I say a moment after, forgetting Mrs. Huntley, and breaking into

a storm of tears. "I *know* he will! I always said we were too prosperous. Nothing has ever happened to us. None of us have ever gone! I *know* he will die; and I said yesterday that I liked him the least of all the boys. Oh, I *wish* I had not said it; Barbara! Barbara! I *wish* I had not said it."

For Barbara has entered, and is standing silently listening. The roses in her cheeks have paled, indeed, and her blue eyes look large and frightened; but, unlike me, she makes no crying fuss. With noiseless despatch she arranges everything for our departure. Neither will she hear of Algy's dying. He will get better. We will go to him at once—all three of us—and will nurse him so well that he will soon be himself again; and whatever happens (with a kindling of the eye, and godly lightening of all her gentle face), is not *God* here—God, *our Friend?* This is what

she keeps saying to me in a soft and comforting whisper during our short transit, with her slight arm thrown round me as I sob in helpless wretchedness on her shoulder. It is very foolish, very childish of me, but I cannot get it out of my head that I said I liked him the least. It haunts me still when I stand by his bedside, when I see his poor cheeks redder than mine were when they wore their rouge, when I notice the hot drought of his parched lips. It haunts me still with disproportioned remorse through all the weeks of his illness.

For the time stretches itself out to weeks —abnormal weary weeks, when the boundaries of day and night confound themselves — when each steps over into his brother's territories—when it grows to feel natural, wakefully, to watch the candle's ghostly shadows, flickering at midnight, and to snatch fitful sleeps at noon! to watch the autumnal dawns coldly breaking

How hard and quick he is breathing! I am glad I cannot see his face.

"I *was* there! I *did* cry! she *did* see me—"

I stop abruptly, choked by tears, by shame, by apprehension.

"Go on!" (spoken with panting shortness).

"He met me there," I say tremulously—"I do not know whether he did it on purpose or not—and said dreadful things! Must I tell you them?" (shuddering)—"Pah! it makes me sick! He said" (speaking with a reluctant hurry)—"that he loved me, and that I loved him, and that I *hated* you, and it took me so by surprise—it was all so horrible, and so different from what I had planned, that I cried—of course I ought not, but I did—I *roared!*"

There does not seem to me anything ludicrous in this mode of expression, neither apparently does there to him.

"Well?"

"I do not think there is anything more!"

takes me for her — often Barbara — catches our hands and covers them with insane kisses.

Sometimes he appeals to her by the most madly tender names—names that I think would surprise Mr. Huntley a good deal, and perhaps not altogether please him; sometimes he alludes to past episodes—episodes that perhaps would have done as well to remain in their graves.

On such occasions I am dreadfully frightened, and very miserable; but all the same, I cannot help glancing across at Roger, with a sort of triumph in my eyes—a sort of *told-you-so* expression, from which it would have required a loftier nature than mine to refrain.

And so the days go on, and I lose reckoning of time. I could hardly tell you whether it were day or night.

My legs ache mostly a good deal, and I feel dull and drowsy from want of sleep.

But the brunt of the nursing falls upon Barbara.

When he was well — even in his best days—Algy was never very reasonable—very considerate; neither, you may be sure, is he so now.

It is always Barbara, Barbara, for whom he is calling. God knows I do my best, and so does Roger. No most loving mother could be gentler, or spare himself less than he does; but somehow we do not content him.

It is not to every one that the gift of nursing is vouchsafed. I think I am clumsy. Try as I will, my hands are not so quick and light and deft as hers—my dress rustles more, and my voice is less soothing.

And so it is always "Barbara! Barbara!" And Barbara is always there — always ready.

The lovely flush that outdid the garden

flowers has left her cheeks indeed, and her eyelids are drooped and heavy; but her eyes shine with as steady a sweetness as ever; for God has lit in them a lamp that no weariness can put out.

Sometimes I think that if one of the lovely spirits that wait upon God in heaven were sent down to minister here below, he would not be very different in look and way and holy tender speech from our Barbara.

Whether it be through her nursing, or by the strength of his own constitution, and the tenacious vitality of youth, or, perhaps, the help of all three, Algy pulls through.

I think he has looked death in the face, as nearly as any one ever did without falling utterly into his cold embrace, but he pulls through.

By very slow, small, and faltering steps, he creeps backs to convalescence. His recovery is a tedious business, with many